

＋原案・監修＋森利道
（アークシステムワークス）

＋著＋駒尾真子

BLAZ BLUE
BLOODEDGE EXPERIENCE
ブラッドエッジ エクスperiエンス

上

ドラゴンブック



カバーイラスト/kyo
カバーデザイン/アフターグロー

"So you're already awake?" She shrugs her shoulders and laughs. Haruka is mischievous.



"He notices the pursuer and dodges."

"Raquel is a bit spoiled, but please take good care of her for a while."



"To meet you so soon... I'm so happy..." Kiiro Hikagami smiled seductively.

Blazblue

Bloodedge Experience

Part 1

Original concept and supervision: Mori Tadashi (Arc System Works)
Author: Komao Mako



Fujimi Dragon Book

Fan translation done by Br3ndan5 with Google Gemini and ChatGPT

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Illustrations: Kyo

CONTENTS

- プロローグ - Prologue
 - 第一章 - Chapter 1
 - 第二章 - Chapter 2
 - 第三章 - Chapter 3
 - 第四章 - Chapter 4
 - 第五章 - Chapter 5
 - 第六章 - Chapter 6
 - 幕間 - Interlude
 - 会敵 - Encounter
 - 秘密 - Secret
- 御剣 - Sacred Sword
 - 不死 - Immortality
 - 接触 - Contact
- 再生 - Regeneration
- あとがき - Afterword

Prologue: Rebirth

My eyelids felt incredibly heavy. I couldn't fathom why I had opened them. Perhaps it was a conscious decision, or maybe it was as instinctive as opening my mouth to take in air. A cold, heavy weight pressed down on my body, making it difficult to breathe.

"Help..."

The breath I tried to expel collapsed in my lungs, replaced by a slimy liquid that welled up in my mouth. It overflowed, filling my mouth with a rusty, nauseating taste.

The blood that had pooled was warm, a stark contrast to the coldness of my body. I was completely immobile, unable even to shiver. I was sinking, growing heavier and heavier with each passing moment.

Is this... how it ends?

My fading thoughts whispered, acknowledging the imminent death. The murky scenery before me gradually turned black. In the darkness, I saw a girl's face. She was always there to take care of me, a girl with a jealous smile.

Oh... if only I hadn't worn my clothes so deep... she'll be angry. I didn't want to upset her. That was my last thought.

Then, a gust of wind swept through the darkness.

My consciousness began to return.

There she was, the girl. But it wasn't the sunny, familiar girl I had imagined; instead, she was a dark-cloaked figure, looking down at me coldly.

Relief washed over me.

Was she safe?

The words I wanted to say died in my throat, broken.

The girl, with her moon-white nails pointed at me, shrugged her shoulders beneath her cloak, her expression a mix of boredom and satisfaction. Her eyes narrowed as she asked in a small voice,

"Do you... want to live?"

Resentment welled up within me. Who did she think she was, putting me in this situation?

But that thought was quickly overshadowed by another.

Do I want to live? The answer was obvious. Yes.

I have to go back... she'll be worried.

This thought, which lingered in the back of my mind, felt strangely carefree, almost detached from the gravity of the situation.

Were those golden eyes looking down on him, able to see even his very soul? With a slight smirk playing on her thin lips, the girl crouched before the mountain of rubble.

Her long cloak parted, revealing a white knee. For a moment, his vision blurred as he was dazzled by the translucent skin, so luminous it seemed to glow.

A hand of the same color reached out and touched his cheek, buried in the rubble. As if drawn to it, the girl's face leaned in, her actions almost like a kiss.

Her lips drew closer, almost touching, as she whispered, "Then, I'll save you. But in exchange... you must obtain the 'Azure.' And me..."

Unable to withstand the weight, his eyelids drooped. In the next moment, a sharp pain shot through him, beyond his closed vision. Blood poured from his mouth and dripped down his neck.

That sensation was the last thing he felt before losing consciousness.

It was as if he were being swallowed by darkness, dragged into an unfathomable abyss, devoured by an unseen beast. Yet, strangely, it was also like a comfortable, muddy slumber.

Chapter 1 - Contact

A shrill sound echoed from somewhere far off. It was an irritatingly loud noise that seemed to tear through a thick membrane, disturbing his peaceful sleep. It was as annoying as an alarm clock, tearing one away from a pleasant slumber. Who could deny the unpleasantness of such a sound?

In any case, he wanted nothing more than to be freed from this cacophony as soon as possible. And so, Naoto Kurogane reached out from under the thick, warm blanket that enveloped him and turned off the noisy alarm clock above his head. It was an oval analog clock.

"Stupid thing," he muttered.

With a slight click, the relentless noise ceased. He felt a small sense of satisfaction, as if he had defeated a minor evil. With a small sigh of contentment, he burrowed back under the warm covers.

But before he could fully surrender to sleep, the doorbell began to ring insistently outside his room. Over and over again.

"So noisy," Naoto mumbled, too tired to say it out loud. He pulled the covers over his head. This would, at least, distance him from the annoyance. But as if anticipating Naoto's feeble attempt at resistance, the doorbell stopped, replaced by the sound of metal scraping. It was the sound of a key unlocking a door. Then, the sound of the front door opening.

Again, he thought.

Someone was entering the house.

Hearing their footsteps, Naoto reluctantly climbed out of his warm bed, not in a hurry but with a resigned expression. Wearing only a T-shirt and sweatpants, he got out of bed and stretched out in the middle of his simply furnished room.

Naoto lived in a 1LDK apartment. The bedroom was just a few steps away from the entrance. As he rubbed his still-sleepy eyes, he saw the door to his room gently open.

"Oh, you're already awake?"

A girl with long hair tied back with a white hair clip peered through the doorway. She was wearing a sailor-style uniform with a white blouse and a blue collar, a pleated skirt, and a red scarf around her neck. Her name was Haruka Hayami. She was Naoto's childhood friend, a classmate at the same high school, and... the daughter of the landlord of the apartment building Naoto lived in.

"You rang the doorbell a million times, and you ask me that? Of course, I'm awake."

Of course, he hadn't planned on waking up when the doorbell rang.

"Let's just pretend that never happened," Haruka said with a mischievous shrug, stepping into Naoto's room with a familiar stride. "I mean, you never wake up to that kind of thing, right? But oh well. I was going to shake you awake and say, 'Nao-kun, wake up!' just like in your favorite game with the childhood friend."

"What are you talking about? That's a total cliché! That's not what real childhood friends do! And I don't even like that game! Well... I mean..." Naoto retorted, sputtering out his words. Then, he blinked, startled by Haruka's sudden mention of a game. The last vestiges of his sleepiness vanished.

Why had Haruka brought up a game out of the blue?

In response, Haruka gave him a slightly teasing look.

"Would you prefer 'Wake up, big brother'?"

"No, that's...!"

"It's okay, Nao-kun. You're a boy too, right? It's not weird. Lots of guys play games with lots of girls, don't they? But it's kind of... lonely, you know? It's a bit lonely to just play games all the time..."

"Hey, I didn't buy it! Fukuda, that guy, forced me to play it!"

Naoto shook his head vigorously in denial, but despite the obvious truth, his excuse sounded shallow.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Here, I'll get your clothes ready. Go wash your face."

"Don't talk to me like you know everything! And don't just open my drawers!"

Naoto hurriedly tried to stop Haruka, who was reaching into his drawers with a motherly attitude. His voice was filled with undisguised agitation.

"I can get my own clothes. Just go away, please." "Is that so? Well, I'll make breakfast then. Don't oversleep."

"I know..."

With a light laugh, Haruka left the room, and Naoto watched her go with a slight slump of his shoulders. As instructed, he headed to the bathroom. The cool floor of the corridor and bathroom sent a shiver down his spine.

This was Naoto's usual morning routine.

Haruka, who would usually force her way in and wake him up, had already let herself in with her key. It was a routine that had been going on for a long time.

Nothing out of the ordinary today...

Naoto looked at his reflection in the mirror after washing his face. He had the same appearance as always. His unruly hair, no matter how much he tried to tame it, and his relaxed gaze that lacked focus. His body was not particularly muscular, but it was fairly well-toned.

And... reflected in the mirror, above his head, was a row of strange symbols. They were numbers, but unlike the numbers he saw in everyday life. They were numbers that Naoto called "those numbers."

"Those numbers"... I only understand them as 'numbers', but maybe there's more to them than that. The only fact is that Naoto can see strange numbers floating above people's heads, but no one else can.

"Hunter's Eye"...

Staring at the number stuck to him like a price tag, Naoto bitterly muttered.

The number he saw was '9810'.

He didn't know if that was an accurate reading or not, and there was no way to check. But his numbers had been around that value for a while now.

These numbers represent vitality, stamina, or something like that. For example, fighters or athletes tend to have higher numbers, while people with illnesses tend to have lower ones. Moreover, the numbers can fluctuate by about 100 each day. If someone is feeling unwell, the number is lower, and if they are in good health, it's higher.

Even though he doesn't know if the numbers he reads are correct, he can say with certainty that they represent vitality. Naoto has witnessed the moment when the value above someone's head turned to '0'.

It was the moment when the person in front of him... his mother... died.

He also knew what happened after that.

"Nao-kun, dinner's ready!"

"Yeah, I'm coming!"

Hearing Haruka's voice from the living room, Naoto returned the towel to the rack and left the bathroom.

Returning to his room, he quickly changed out of his pajamas and went to the living room. As soon as he did, a delicious smell hit his nose.

Standing in the kitchen with a small counter was, of course, Haruka. Wearing her Shinkawahama First High School uniform, she was flipping a spatula, placing a freshly cooked bacon and egg on a white plate. Beside it was a lightly toasted piece of toast, and on the table was a mini salad with lettuce, tomato, and broccoli.

Naoto couldn't understand how she could prepare breakfast so quickly every morning.

"Here, milk. Eat up, or you'll be late."

Haruka quickly placed a plate with bacon and eggs and a toast on his usual seat and urged him on.

"You're so energetic this morning..."

Muttering a complaint, Naoto sat down at the table as he was told.

As usual, he glanced at his familiar friend's head. There, as always, was the strange number that only he could see.

The value he saw was '10500'. It was higher than Naoto's, as usual, but it was about 50 higher than yesterday. It seemed that she was in good health.

"Itadakimasu."

"Please enjoy."

"Because you woke me up at the perfect time, I have plenty of time for breakfast." After giving a quick bow of gratitude, Naoto reached for the steaming warm meal. He spread margarine on his toast and took a bite. It was his usual morning flavor. The fried egg, stuck to the crispy bacon, was cooked to Naoto's liking, with a slightly runny yolk, and the soft white was delicious. The lemon-scented dressing on the mini salad was also refreshing and tasty.

But then he realized something. Their refrigerator wasn't supposed to have anything as sophisticated as salad dressing.

"Hey, Haruka, did you make this?"

When Naoto asked, Haruka, who seemed to have eaten breakfast at her own home, nodded from across the table.

"Of course. Nao-kun, you saw me making the fried eggs, didn't you?"

"No, I mean, this, the salad dressing." Naoto pointed to the small bowl now serving as a salad bowl with his fork.

Haruka frowned again, then laughed. "Oh, you mean that? Well, the only dressing-like thing in your fridge is mayonnaise."

"Ugh... you could've just put mayonnaise on it."

"It's not a big deal. Hey, did you not like it?"

"No, it's super delicious. I'm impressed."

"... Fufu, I'm glad."

"What's with that weird laugh?"

Haruka's laugh, whether it was from shyness or pride, made Naoto chuckle. He stabbed a piece of tomato with his fork, feeling grateful.

As always, he was amazed by his childhood friend's cooking skills. No, he was constantly amazed by her ability in all household chores.

Because of this, Naoto couldn't look down on Haruka.

He was already renting this room for practically nothing, thanks to Haruka's mother, Yukie Hayami, the owner of the apartment building, and their aunt-nephew relationship. On top of that, Haruka not only woke Naoto up every morning but also cooked dinner for him and helped with the cleaning.

It had been several years since he had moved out of his parents' house, and now Naoto's life was inseparable from the Hayami family.

(I'm really being spoiled...)

Munching on the last bite of his toast, Naoto sighed inwardly. He had grown accustomed to Haruka preparing his breakfast without question or resistance. And his attitude of questioning it had become a distant memory.

In the end, it was comfortable. The peaceful everyday life that Haruka and her mother Yuki provided.

Thinking about this made Naoto feel a deep sense of gratitude, but at the same time, he felt a bit pathetic for being so spoiled. Even so, he was reluctant to let go of this warm breakfast time, and he savored another bite of tomato, embracing the tranquility that flowed through the dining area.

It took about thirty minutes on foot to get from the apartment building where Naoto and Haruka lived to Shinkawahama First High School. Although he could have stayed at home a little later by taking the bus, Naoto preferred to walk to school, disliking crowded buses and preferring the bustling streets. Haruka also went out with him and walked to school together.

Naoto had suggested several times that she could just take the bus since she didn't have to match his pace, but Haruka would always laugh and say it was good for her health. Though, considering that she would often take the bus when they couldn't return home together, her definition of 'health' seemed pretty flexible.

They walked through a residential area with many apartment buildings and waited at a crosswalk in front of the nearest convenience store. It was early October. The remnants of summer, which had lingered until a few days ago, had almost faded, and the cool morning air felt just right against the newly changed school uniform.

The clear blue sky was dotted with thin white clouds, and looking up made him feel somewhat peaceful. As he was about to swallow the thought that had welled up in him, Haruka, who had been acting strangely, looked up at him.

"Hey, about that... Nao-kun, do you really like... that kind of thing?"

"Huh? What kind of thing?"

Not understanding what she meant, Naoto rubbed his eyes with his thumb. Haruka's eyes darted back and forth nervously.

"Like, um, you know... the game, with the girl with pink hair as the protagonist? Like that?"

As Haruka hesitated and continued, Naoto felt his blood run cold.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the traffic light turn green.

But his feet wouldn't move instinctively.

"Ha... Haruka?"

"Oh, Nao-kun, it's green."

Not realizing his state, Haruka pulled on his sleeve.

With great effort, Naoto clumsily crossed the crosswalk and then turned abruptly to face Haruka.

"Why do you know such detailed things!?"

"Whoa, you surprised me! Um, well, I was just wondering what kind of things you were interested in? And since there were so many, I thought it would be okay to look at one..."

Haruka shrugged and began to explain, her fingers twisting together in front of her chest. It seemed she felt a bit guilty. However, it was clear that Haruka's guilt was about going through Naoto's belongings without permission, rather than about upsetting him with her earlier comments.

"Well, you see, I feel like I have a duty to know what kind of things you're interested in and what you're like on a daily basis."

"What kind of duty is that?! And why are you suddenly speaking so formally!"

"Oh,ahaha, well, there are different positions, you know? Like, a girl's secret..."

"Ah, right. 'Lovely Academy Paradise' is pretty good, the blue-haired girl is cute! And in 'Older Sister Together★', the heroine is..."

"You're listing more than one! You've been playing a lot, haven't you? And don't change the subject!"

Naoto interrupted Haruka, his tone pleading for her to stop. Why on earth did he have to listen to game recommendations from his childhood friend, who was practically family?

However, whether she realized Naoto's feelings or not (most likely she didn't), Haruka shrank slightly, looking up at him with an oddly formal expression.

"Um, you see. I'm not really that interested in those kinds of things. But if you like them, then I..."

"Can you stop saying 'those kinds of things,' Haruka?! And I'll say it again, it's just a game!" Naoto shouted, wanting to cry. He was about to continue, but his words caught in his throat.

His flustered gaze was not on Haruka's slightly embarrassed eyes, but on a spot just above her head.

The number had moved. It had increased by 12.

Naoto felt an indescribable awkwardness at the subtle change.

The numbers above people's heads represented their vitality. But over the past year, he had learned that they could also fluctuate slightly depending on emotions. They would decrease with sadness, resentment, despair, and pain. They would increase with joy, happiness, and sometimes anger, impatience, and... affection and shyness. He tried to not pay attention to it, to not look, but even so, he couldn't help but see it. It was visible to him.

Naoto looked away from Haruka. He was never very good at sensing other people's feelings. He was more on the obtuse side. And yet, seeing someone's emotional fluctuations through something as mechanical as a number change... it was somehow very uncomfortable. He didn't know how to feel about it.

The scenery of their commute changed as they reached the bustling downtown area near their school.

As they walked, the crowd gradually thickened, and by the time they reached the busiest intersection, it was so crowded that it was a bit inconvenient to walk side by side.

Naoto awkwardly paused the conversation and stepped in front of Haruka, as he always did. Haruka naturally stepped back and lightly gripped the bag that Naoto was carrying on his shoulder.

He could feel a slight weight on his shoulder. It was a signal that Haruka was following closely behind him.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

As usual, he turned around to check on her just to be sure. Looking up, Haruka nodded with a smile.

After walking for another five minutes, the crowd began to thin out. Until then, their trivial conversation had been interrupted. But as they crossed the street and passed the intersection, Naoto suddenly lost the small weight he had been feeling on his shoulder.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

He thought Haruka had let go of his bag. But when Naoto looked back in confusion, Haruka was nowhere to be seen.

No, it wasn't just Haruka.

There was no one.

The bustling crowd, the cars waiting for the signal to change, even the crows perched on the power lines had disappeared, leaving behind an empty, lifeless commercial district.

It was as if he had been left behind in a movie set. Naoto was the only one left.

"...Hey? Haruka?"

The word "daydream" popped into Naoto's head.

What on earth was going on? There was no way he could have fallen asleep while walking through a crowd. Yet, the idea of suddenly turning around to find everyone gone was even more absurd.

If this were a movie set, it would probably belong to the horror genre. As those thoughts raced through his mind, Naoto felt a sweaty tension on his back and carefully scanned his surroundings. He turned slowly, rotating his gaze behind him.

In that moment, his breath caught.

The deserted shopping district was completely empty. In the distance stood a single girl.

What a perfect setup; it clearly understood the clichés of horror.

While he struggled to comprehend the situation, Naoto found himself unable to look away from the girl, as if he were pinned in place.

There was some distance between them. More importantly, a light seemed to shine from behind her, making it difficult to clearly see the details of her figure.



Her long, beautiful blonde hair was tied in two braids on either side of her head, and she was wearing a flowing black dress. She looked about twelve years old, but there was a unique aura about her that didn't quite match her appearance.

Her dress was a translucent white, and her eyes, looking straight at him, were as red as blood.

(What beautiful eyes)

But what really caught his attention was the ribbon that held her long hair back. The large black ribbon stood up straight, making the girl's silhouette look like a rabbit.

The rabbit girl wore a very sorrowful expression, as if she were worried about someone's future or reminiscing about someone long gone... that was the gaze she had.

With a sadness that could almost be called longing, the girl looked straight at Naoto with her crimson eyes.

"Who are you?" Naoto wanted to ask. But he couldn't speak. He couldn't even move his body. Yet, he felt as if he had seen this girl somewhere before.

It was a distant, faint feeling, one that felt like it could slip away and vanish at any moment. A vague sense of déjà vu that was too hazy to help him remember where he had met her. But he... he knew this girl... didn't he?

"Who are you?" He wanted to ask again. But before he could, the girl's small lips moved.

She seemed to have whispered something. The short words, which sounded like a sigh, didn't reach Naoto, and he couldn't hear what she had said. But it felt like a very important prophecy, and Naoto leaned forward. He couldn't hear it well. He was about to say, "Say it again," when...

Something bumped into his back with a small thud.

"Oops."

He was startled by the voice, which sounded very close.

In that instant, the crowd returned to Naoto's surroundings. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Naoto's consciousness returned to the crowd.

When he became aware of his surroundings, people were bustling all around him, and Naoto stood there, dazed. A few adults cast curious glances at the student who had suddenly stopped, then moved on, seemingly indifferent.

Haruka, who was right behind him, frowned worriedly and peered at Naoto, who was standing there with his mouth slightly open.

"What's wrong? Why did you stop all of a sudden?"

She must have bumped into him earlier. She lightly rubbed her forehead.

Looking back at her round, somewhat animal-like eyes, Naoto dug his hand into his hair, scratching his head as if to confirm he was really there.

"Um..."

'Wasn't there a girl just now?' He started to ask but quickly stopped. There was no way to explain the strange phenomenon he had just experienced, let alone the girl herself, in a way that would make sense to her.

It didn't seem possible.

A man in a suit, who must have been walking right behind him, glanced sideways at Naoto, who had suddenly stopped, and hurried past him.

Everything was back to normal. No one else seemed to have noticed anything unusual.

"It's nothing."

That's right, it was nothing. In the end, a small girl had just looked at him; it wasn't as if some outrageous event had taken place. It wasn't something to worry about. It shouldn't be.

Naoto repeated this to himself several times and took a deep breath.

"Let's go, Haruka."

"Yeah... but are you okay? Are you feeling unwell?"

"I'm fine. I just felt really sleepy for a second, that's all." Naoto tried to look as sleepy as possible, as Haruka looked at him with a worried expression. He didn't want to worry Haruka, no matter what the circumstances.

"Sleepy, while walking? Nao-kun, that's not okay at all, it's dangerous."

"I know. That's why I woke up."

"That's not the point. You really worry me in the mornings, Nao-kun..."

Seeing Haruka's concerned expression, Naoto shrugged lightly and smiled wryly.

"Come on... are you my mother or something?"

In fact, it was more worrying that she took such a clumsy excuse seriously. He kept that thought to himself, not wanting to add to Haruka's concerns.

"Well, I'm not really keen on being a mother," she replied.

“What do you mean by that? Now, let’s get going.”

Waiting for Haruka, who looked somewhat dissatisfied while grabbing her bag again, Naoto pushed forward through the crowd.

As he took his first step, he realized something.

That girl. Something about her was strange...

(She didn't have a number)

The numbers above people's heads that indicated their vitality.

It was the first time he hadn't seen anyone's number. The only time he hadn't was... in a dream.

(So, did I really fall asleep?)

He was definitely weak in the mornings, but he couldn't believe he was this bad. He scratched his head unconsciously and sighed instead of complaining.

If it was a dream, then that was fine. If it was a dream, anything inexplicable could happen.

But even though he had been trying to dismiss it as a daydream, Naoto's mind was still filled with the image of the girl.

As the sun rose and midday approached, the classroom at Shin-Kawahama High School began to heat up, reminding everyone that even though it was autumn, summer wasn't far behind.

During the break after the second period of modern literature, Naoto took off his jacket, feeling the heat, as he heard the refreshing sound of someone opening a carbonated drink from the front of the classroom. At that moment, he noticed a classmate approaching him with a light step.

“Hmm, Kurogane-kun. Can I have a moment?”

The voice belonged to Fukuda Shinnosuke, a classmate and friend from middle school, who had come right up to Naoto's desk and cleared his throat dramatically.

Shinnosuke's short hair drew mixed comments from classmates—some said it looked clean, while others thought it made him look silly. Although Naoto couldn't judge others, Shinnosuke had a relaxed demeanor that only emphasized his kind-hearted personality.

He was about the same height as Naoto, and their grades were similar, as were their tastes and hobbies. Most importantly, they got along well.

Thinking back to that bond of mischief they shared, Naoto remembered the little incident that had occurred that morning.

"Damn you, Shinnosuke. Thanks to you, I had a terrible time..." Why did he have to be investigated about his preferences for game events by someone who was practically family?

"A terrible time? What are you talking about?"

Looking up at Shinnosuke with resentment, Naoto found that his friend showed no remorse; instead, he was smiling cheerfully.

For a moment, Naoto considered explaining everything in detail and confronting him about it, but that thought quickly vanished. It would only lead to being laughed at. More importantly, it would expose his own pathetic situation.

"... It's nothing. I don't want to explain."

"Is that so? Well, whatever. Anyway, Kurogane-kun, how was that 'study material' I lent you? Was it helpful?"

"Study material?" A dry laugh escaped Naoto's lips. "No, not at all."

In fact, he thought that the one who learned something from that game was probably Haruka, not him. But that was something he decided not to say right now.

"At least you understand that it's all just fantasy, right?"

When Naoto shook his head with a sullen expression, Shinnosuke opened his eyes wide as if he couldn't believe it.

"What are you saying? You're the one living a fantasy life."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Are you serious? Get a grip, Naoto! You're renting a room in your aunt's apartment and living alone. Your cousin, who is also your childhood friend, wakes you up every morning, makes you breakfast, and when you come home, you eat dinner with her... How is that not a fantasy?"

"Otaku gamer dude!"

"Stop calling me that! What are you going to do if it sticks?"

Leaning forward and clenching his fist, Shinnosuke passionately argued. Naoto retorted, equally exasperated.

But Shinnosuke wasn't the kind of guy to back down from such a small resistance. Grabbing Naoto's head with both hands, he forcefully turned his face... towards the front of the classroom.

"Ugh... what..."

"Look closely, Naoto," Shinnosuke's voice was unusually serious. What Naoto was being forced to look at was Haruka, chatting with friends in the front row.

Still holding Naoto's head, Shinnosuke continued in a low, forceful tone.

"She has a gentle and kind personality. She's popular enough to be elected as a student council member, but she never forgets to be approachable. Plus, she's great at housework, especially cooking. She's not exactly a beauty, but she's pure and cute. And her chest is above average...!..."

"Hey, what are you looking at?"

"Besides, her mother is a wealthy woman who owns an entire apartment building, and she's also super beautiful, and she's got huge boobs! There's no way you can mess this up!"

"Will you keep your voice down?!"

Naoto slapped Shinnosuke's hand away from his ear and quickly covered his friend's unruly mouth.

As expected, Haruka turned her head at the sound and tilted it slightly in confusion. Naoto waved his hands to indicate it was nothing, and she nodded in understanding before returning to her conversation.

Once Naoto saw that, he released his grip on Shinnosuke's breathing.

"Phew... you... what..."

It seemed like he had really been suffocating him. With a slightly more serious expression than usual, Naoto apologized briefly.

"Anyway, I think you should be more aware of how lucky you are. You're going to get punched by some unlucky guy sooner or later."

"Like you?"

"Yeah, I hope so."

Shinnosuke looked down at him with a surprisingly serious expression. Naoto immediately retracted his joking smile.

He rested his chin on his hand and glanced over at Haruka again.

She seemed to be having a lively conversation, her cheerful laughter echoing towards him—a sound that was a bit too exuberant for typical high school boys.

Seeing Haruka laugh so joyfully, Naoto couldn't deny that she had a rather attractive appearance.

According to what Shinnosuke had told him earlier, she was apparently quite popular among her classmates, seniors, and juniors. Some people were even trying to win her heart.

But Naoto couldn't quite understand why Haruka was so popular.

(Is she really cute...?)

For Naoto, rather than thinking she was cute, thoughts like "she's so nosy" or "she's so naggy" or "I can't leave her alone" or "I'm worried about her" filled his mind. More like a mother than a girl his age.

With someone like Haruka, there was no way anything like what Shinnosuke said could happen. He had never even considered such a thing.

(Come to think of it, Yuki-san says the same thing all the time.)

Remembering this, Naoto furrowed his brow with a complicated expression.

Yuki, Haruka's mother, was someone Naoto couldn't look up to more than Haruka herself. Since she was busy with work and rarely came home, he only saw her occasionally, but every time she did, she would give Naoto a knowing smile and press him.

When are you going to make a move on Haruka? Just go for it already, you're a guy, aren't you?

And so on.

(Seriously, all of them. And Yuki-san is her mother, for goodness sake. Telling her own daughter to hit on me? No normal mother would say that. I have no idea what she's thinking.)

As he muttered to himself, Shinnosuke suddenly said, "Hey."

Naoto noticed it too. The bell had rung, signaling the end of break time.

Haruka checked her watch, ended her conversation, and returned to her seat. When she looked over at him, she gave him a friendly smile and waved lightly.

Naoto returned a wry smile. It didn't feel bad. Next to him, Shinnosuke was giving him a slightly jealous look.

But before Shinnosuke could tease him, the classroom door opened precisely on time. It was Tadayuki Isa, the teacher in charge of Earth Science, who had come for the next class. He was not tall but had a sturdy build, and his chubby round face always had a grumpy expression. He must have been in his mid-forties. He wore old-fashioned square glasses and always dressed the same way, so he didn't seem to care much about his appearance.

In addition to Earth Science, he was also in charge of student discipline, but his nagging and critical personality made him unpopular with the students.

Shinnosuke was one of the students who disliked Isa. As soon as he saw him, he quickly returned to his seat as if he didn't want to be noticed.

Isa glared at the students who were hastily correcting their postures, one by one, from behind his drooping eyelids, and roughly placed his attendance book and textbook on the desk.

It was nothing unusual. It was the beginning of another dreary lesson, which happened twice a week.

But Naoto was shocked for the second time that day.

(What is that...? That number?)

He repeatedly rubbed his eyes, wondering if he was mistaken, but the number hovering like a label above the balding middle-aged man's head did not change.

'925'. He had never seen such a number in everyday life before. It was too low.

"Kurogane! What do you think you're doing, not taking out your textbook or notebook? Class has already started! Now!"

"Ah... yes!"

Startled by the sharp command and pointed finger, Naoto snapped back to reality. He hurriedly pulled out his textbook from his bag and spread it open on his desk.

Once Isa confirmed that Naoto was ready, he delivered a lecture on how foolish it was not to come fully prepared before starting class, adopting a heavy and authoritative tone.

Holding the textbook awkwardly in one hand, he wrote with such pressure that the chalk tip broke, making his handwriting difficult to read. His frequent use of a handkerchief to wipe the sweat off his forehead was typical and did not stand out in the usual classroom setting.

However, Naoto felt unsettled. The lesson, which he usually found uninteresting, was completely drowned out by Isa's voice today.

(925? You've got to be kidding... even a university hospital patient has more reasonable numbers.)

He wondered if something was wrong with his eyesight. But looking around the classroom, he saw no one else displaying abnormal numbers other than Isa.

Was it possible for only one person's number to appear abnormal?

(What's going on...?)

Naoto covered his eyes with his palm.

That was a mistake.

"Kurogane!!"

Isa's furious shout sent a wave of tension throughout the classroom.

When Naoto looked up, he saw Isa glaring at him with an intimidating expression from the front of the classroom.

"You have the nerve to fall asleep in my class...!"

"No, I wasn't asleep..."

"Don't talk back!!"

Isa's voice came at him with even more pressure. Naoto realized his mistake and felt a surge of regret. When in a bad mood, Isa despised any student who spoke out of turn, and he was known to be very unforgiving.

Today, it seemed like Isa was in an especially foul mood. He slammed the textbook he had gripped tightly onto the desk and pointed a finger at Naoto.

"Try answering the question I just asked. If you weren't asleep, then you should know it."

Naoto stammered, at a loss for words. He hadn't been asleep, but he hadn't been listening to Isa at all either. Of course, he had no idea what the question was.

"Sorry, I don't know." Admitting that he hadn't been listening felt embarrassing, so Naoto tried to suppress his emotions and answered as calmly as he could.

Immediately, Isa's face twisted into a sneer, his gaze filled with both anger and a sense of superiority.

"See? This is why you're useless. Instead... Hayami. Answer."

"Y-yes."

Haruka's voice, slightly surprised, made Naoto reflexively furrow his brows. Her being called on in his place wasn't deliberate, but he felt guilty as if he had inadvertently passed the torch.

"It's caused by volcanic activity..."

"That's right. Hayami, you've really studied well. You can sit down."

With an oddly pleased expression, Isa nodded his head vigorously.

Naoto found himself frowning again at the sight.

(The numbers...)

They increased. By a whopping 70 at that. For a student to answer a question correctly and see that kind of jump was unusual.

“In contrast, Kuragane, you...”

With a stricter tone, Isa turned back to Naoto. The number above his head also rose. This time, it went up by 37.

Wasn't that fluctuation a bit too extreme? It wasn't a typical range of change.

Isa pointed and glared at Naoto, his thick lips moving busily as he explained just how useless Naoto was. Normally, he would feel dissatisfaction and discomfort at this one-sided criticism but would bite his tongue, knowing that arguing would only prolong the lecture.

Yet, Naoto's ears paid no attention to Isa's words; he continued to stare intently at the busy numbers above the teacher's head, fluctuating between 1 and 2.

It was baffling. He couldn't understand why this was happening, but an unpleasant feeling clung to him, making him uncomfortable. Unable to hold back, Naoto spoke up.

“Mr. Isa, are you feeling unwell?”

The classroom fell completely silent. Everyone, already holding their breath during Isa's lecture, seemed to stop breathing altogether.

Isa's face reddened with mounting anger as he shook his clenched fist on the desk.

What have I done? Naoto instinctively put his head in his hands, feeling a delayed wave of regret.

Isa slammed the desk with his fist.

“It's your fault, Kuragane!!”

The air crackled with the intensity of his anger. Naoto felt as if he might be struck.

But just as he huddled his shoulders in anticipation, his ears picked up a strange sound.

—Kichichi.

It was similar to the sound of winding a spring, but much more unpleasant and biological.

A shiver ran through him at the instinctive disgust. Was something there? Just as Naoto grimaced at the unsettling presence, the bell signaling the end of class rang.

"By next week, each of you should research at least two things caused by volcanic activity. I'll be asking in the next class," Isa said before hurriedly exiting the classroom.

Before Isa vanished through the classroom door, the final number Naoto saw above his head was "1007." For a living person, that was undeniably low.

"Ugh..."

The suffocating atmosphere that had filled the classroom dissipated with Isa's exit. As he listened to his classmates slowly returning to their usual chatter, Naoto slumped forward on his desk, exhaling deeply.

His mind was filled with confusion, leaving him feeling unsettled.

He ran his fingers roughly through his thick hair, a habit he had developed over the years whenever he felt troubled.

"Man, it's dumb to interrupt Isa when he's in lecture mode. He was completely locked onto you," Shinnosuke said, running over with an exasperated expression. The slight dissatisfaction in his tone likely stemmed from having been dragged into extra assignments because of Naoto. For that, Naoto could only apologize.

Still with his hand in his hair, Naoto lifted his head and noticed Haruka standing beside Shinnosuke, her expression clouded with concern.

"Nao-kun, you seem a bit spaced out today. Lack of sleep?" she asked. "No, it's not that... well," Naoto hesitated, unsure of how to respond.

Neither Haruka nor Shinnosuke knew about Naoto's unusual "Hunter's Eyes." Naturally, he had no intention of sharing that. So he couldn't possibly say anything about the numbers above his head.

Yet he couldn't shake his curiosity, so he asked them, trying to gauge their feelings.

"Hey, didn't Isa seem a bit off today?"

"Really? He seemed the same as always to me." Shinnosuke's immediate response was carefree, causing Naoto to smirk wryly. He figured Shinnosuke wouldn't even remember the details of the class, let alone Isa's behavior. After all, they were quite alike in that regard.

To be honest, he had never expected much from his laid-back friend. He glanced sideways at Haruka.

Haruka, looking troubled, had her chin resting on her hand, deep in thought.

“...It wasn’t that he was particularly strange, but when you were called on earlier, Isa-sensei seemed to have his eyes wandering,” she noted.

“Really...? Was that so?”

“Yeah. It seemed like he was staring at you, then suddenly looked away, only to return his gaze again... It felt like he was looking at me, but his focus wasn’t quite there. I thought that was a bit odd.”

Listening to Haruka’s slightly uncertain words, Naoto shifted his hand from his hair to rest his chin on his palm. His gaze naturally drifted toward the window.

Even Haruka, who couldn’t see the numbers, sensed something unusual about Isa. It might have been a misinterpretation.

It could be. In fact, it seems entirely natural to think that way. However, this sense of discomfort nagged at Naoto like an ominous premonition, making his nerves twitch.

It could be. In fact, it seems entirely natural to think that way. However, this sense of discomfort nagged at Naoto like an ominous premonition, making his nerves twitch.

After school. Naoto was walking alone on his way home from Shinkawahama First High School to his apartment. Haruka, who usually walked home with him, had hurried off first. The reason he hadn’t accompanied her was due to a trivial errand he needed to run.

On his way home, Naoto stopped by the staff room. His goal was Isa. He wanted to check the number above his head one more time. However, by the time Naoto arrived, Isa had already gone home, and he was nowhere to be found within the school.

Without a valid reason, it was unlikely that a student could just ask a teacher for their address or their route home. More than that, Naoto thought about whether it was worth going to such lengths, and reluctantly decided to give up, leaving through the school gate a little later than usual.

He walked slowly toward the bustling area along his school route. The sun was dyed a reddish hue, as if the western sky had been painted. Compared to just after the start of the second semester, the days felt just a bit shorter.

However, Naoto’s mind was not focused on the length of the days drifting away from summer or the vivid sunset; it was captured by something else entirely.

“925.”

Normally, he tried his best to ignore that number. But today, he couldn’t shake his curiosity about it. Because it was simply impossible. Such a number couldn’t exist.

It was unbelievable that someone could stand calmly, yelling at students, for forty-five minutes in that state, unable to even maintain their consciousness.

“Seriously, this is ridiculous... But there's no way to confirm it. Ugh, what's with Isa? Why did he have to go home?”

As he muttered his dissatisfaction, he felt more frustrated, his mouth twisting into a frown. He instinctively ran his fingers through his hair, tousling it messily... but he stopped. At the same time, he halted in his tracks.

Thoughts of Isa's abnormality vanished from his mind in an instant.

What he saw beyond the shadows of the street was something even more unusual.

It was a shadow of two people running away with incredible speed. One was a man, hunched over in an unnatural posture. The other was a small girl... or so he thought.

Yet, the abnormality that instantly caught Naoto's attention was neither the presence of the figures nor their stature.

It was the same number.

He couldn't clearly see the appearance of either of the two who had run past. However, the abnormality of the numbers was burned into his mind at a glance.

The number that appeared above the girl's head had far too many digits. Normally, no human, regardless of who they are, exceeds five digits. However, above that girl, there was at least an eight-digit number.

In contrast, the number above the hunched man's head was—“0.”

While the girl was one thing, there was no mistake about the man. Naoto saw it clearly.

“0.” It signifies the dead.

There was no way he should be able to run... no way he could move.

“... Am I just tired?”

He had seen numbers that were impossible to comprehend. His eyes might be playing tricks on him. It would be best to hurry home today and rest.

Just as he thought to quicken his pace—

“No. No, no, no, wait, wait, wait!” he hurriedly stopped himself.

What he should focus on wasn't the numbers, but the situation.

Right now, a girl was being chased by a suspicious man.

With this realisation, Naoto sprang into action, pursuing the two figures he had seen.

It was surprisingly easy to figure out which way they had gone.

The place Naoto rushed into looked as if a localized disaster had swept through. Utility poles were broken, the asphalt of the road was torn up, and twisted guardrail sections were carelessly thrown in the middle of the street.

Ah, that makes sense. A strange sense of understanding settled in his chest. It looked like the aftermath of the two with the abnormal numbers.

People passing by were staring at the horribly scarred landscape and recording it on their mobile devices. Countless videos would probably be uploaded to the internet later.

Glancing at the busy photographers searching for their next target, Naoto sprinted through the path marked by unusual destruction.

Since when had his heart been pounding so fast?

It wasn't tension or fear. It felt like a troubling excitement was building within him. Was he worried about that girl? No, that wasn't it. There was something urgent, something that quickened his pulse.

(That girl...)

Wasn't she similar to...?

The girl he had seen in a daydream this morning. The blonde girl who had appeared in the empty shopping district and stared at him with her cool yet sorrowful, tearful crimson eyes. He felt compelled to find her. He couldn't afford to lose sight of her, and though he was already out of breath, his legs rushed forward.

Driven by instinct—or perhaps by some sensation—he ran and ran, occasionally leaping over rolling debris.

Finally, Naoto reached his destination.

It was a dimly lit place.

An abandoned apartment complex.

It had been developed as a bedroom community, but due to an incident that had occurred a few years ago, the plans had been halted.

The area was a construction site that had been interrupted and left abandoned. Numerous square buildings, almost completed, stood in disarray, having become ruins without electricity. Here and there, streetlights without bulbs stood alone, casting elongated shadows of silhouettes in the deserted corners.

No one willingly approached this place. Even those who fancied themselves outlaws or delinquents looking for a hangout wouldn't choose this as their refuge.

The abandoned apartment complex, built for people but now unwelcoming, had a suffocating, oppressive atmosphere. It felt more nauseating than eerie, more uncomfortable than terrifying.

Naoto's feet, which were about to rush in, halted just before entering the premises.

"Is this... it?"

Staring at the "No Trespassing" sign on the fence, Naoto bitterly spat out his words.

It was obvious that the man and girl had entered here. The flimsy fence was bent inward, the sign twisted unnaturally along with it.

It looked as if someone had forcefully driven a vehicle through. Yet there were no tire marks; instead, strange, deep scratches marred the ground as if made by something sharp.

Beyond this point was dangerous. An ominous vibe hung in the air.

From deep within the dark, shadowy apartment complex, a sound echoed as if a building had collapsed, causing Naoto to sharply inhale.

Before him lay a desolate scene, sharply divided by the sunset's crimson and the darkness of the shadows. There were no moving figures. If it weren't for the earlier loud noise, he wouldn't have even considered searching for signs of life.

However, he heard another crashing sound, this one slightly louder than before, and Naoto instinctively kicked off the ground. He slipped through the gap in the mangled fence, stepping into the dark, empty domain.

If the girl and the man had entered here, then the sound must have been caused by one of them. Either way, it was surely a warning of the girl's peril.

The sound had come from straight ahead. Naoto sprinted along the paved sidewalk toward that direction.

The atmosphere felt as if time had stopped. The buildings stood solid enough to be usable, yet there was no warmth of human life anywhere. Only empty apartments and forgotten debris remained. The stagnant air lingered, and the shadows seemed to cling to the surroundings.

It was no wonder so many ghost stories originated here. As scenes flitted past the edges of his vision, Naoto felt a chill run down his spine.

Why had that girl come to such a place?

(Weren't they being chased? If that was the case, wouldn't it be safer to flee toward a more populated area...?)

She could have even dashed into a store. A scream in the shopping district would attract a crowd.

If she had been driven here against her will, it was already an emergency situation with no time to spare. He needed to find her quickly and contact the authorities.

The abandoned apartment complex, having been left untouched immediately after construction, continued on endlessly with similar scenery, quickly disorienting Naoto like a maze. None of the buildings had any distinctive features to serve as landmarks. How could a housing complex not have a single map sign?

"Damn it... which way did they go...?"

The path he had been following came to a dead end at a row of withering trees, and Naoto hurriedly stopped. The road formed a T-junction, splitting off to the left and right. He quickly checked both paths, but no sounds were coming from either.

The area was eerily silent. It put him in a bad mood. The deep colors of the setting sun seemed to seep into the deserted complex, casting sharp shadows that gave the illusion of being trapped in darkness.

The sound of the collapse that had guided him earlier was gone. The noise of his own ragged breathing felt deafening in the oppressive silence.

"...Did they escape?"

Naoto muttered, as if trying to confirm with someone.

Thinking back, these were the two who had been playing tag, breaking utility poles along the way. There was no guarantee he could catch up with them even if he ran desperately. It was entirely possible the girl had managed to escape before he arrived.

(What am I doing...?)

This was recklessness at its finest. Shouldn't he have contacted the authorities first?

As the thought weighed on him, he let out a deep sigh, his eyelids heavy.

The girl might no longer be in the apartment complex. He had no idea where to go next; maybe it was best to turn back. Or perhaps he should search the vicinity a little longer.

Just as he was about to turn on his heel, he heard a sound.

"Ki-chi-chi."

"Wh-...?!"

It came from nearby. Naoto turned around reflexively. To the left of the T-junction, in the shadows, stood a man.

(When did he...!)

There had been no footsteps, no presence. Naoto instinctively braced himself and checked above him.

'0'. No doubt about it, it was the man he had seen earlier.

The man was wearing a tattered, ill-fitting dark navy suit. The striped tie was frayed and ragged, making his appearance look especially shabby. He had a lean frame that seemed unnaturally hunched, with his arms hanging limply at his sides. Through his disheveled bangs, he was staring intently at Naoto.

Upon meeting the man's gaze, Naoto held his breath. A chill ran down his spine.

The man's eyes were not human.

His eyeballs had swollen to the size of clenched fists, protruding out of their sockets. The dark part of his eyes was unnaturally large, glistening with a wet sheen that could be seen clearly even from several meters away.

He could see it.

The black eyes suddenly moved up and down, left and right, as if checking the surroundings. It wasn't a sequential glance; the right eye faced the right side, while the left eye turned to the left, both looking simultaneously. The man moved his eyes around like a chameleon, then fixed his right eye directly on Naoto.

"Ugh..."

A strained voice escaped Naoto's lips involuntarily. Before he could feel fear, he was overwhelmed by a sense of disgust.

What is this guy? He was clearly not human. First of all... the number above his head is '0'. It was hard to say he was alive. So why is he moving and looking this way?

“Ki-chi-chi-chi.”

The strange sound came again. But this time, he clearly understood where it was coming from. He realized it.

It was from the man in front of him. With his mouth half-open and drooping, a sound like a beetle wriggling was coming from inside.

It was a horrifying sight. Driven by sheer revulsion, Naoto took a step back.

Perhaps that small movement invited him. The man turned his swollen left eye towards Naoto and dragged his tired suit closer.

(This is bad...!)

He should run. Clenching his teeth against fear, Naoto tried to back away.

Then, a voice passed by him.

“...You're in the way.”

“Eh?”

No, it was the wind that passed. Black and golden—wind.

The wind rushed forward in the form of a girl, and with the same momentum, she kicked off the ground and leaped into the air.

Her quick jump was like a gust of wind. The gust kicked the suited man away from Naoto and slammed him against the wall of the apartment complex looming behind.

The man's body flew easily through the air, creating a thunderous sound as he crashed through the concrete wall, collapsing inside.

Dust billowed up like it was released from years of tension, forming a thick gray curtain.

It happened in an instant. Naoto was left bewildered, unable to comprehend what just occurred.

The girl, who had rushed in like a whirlwind, turned back to look at him.

In the deserted complex, where the sunset burned with gold and shadow, she shimmered.

She was a beautiful girl. Her radiant golden hair was tied up high, adorned with a black ribbon standing upright at the base. Her skin was translucent white, glowing with the reflected hues of the setting sun.

Her eyes were golden. More extravagant than her hair, they exuded an indescribable nobility even with just a fleeting glance.

She looked just like the girl he had encountered in his daydream that morning, her hair tied in two bunches of golden locks.

However, the girl standing in front of Naoto, with her golden eyes tied in a single ponytail, seemed to be a few years older. She was probably around Naoto's age.

She had a delicate appearance and a slender frame. Much shorter than Naoto, she slightly tilted her chin down, causing her large eyes to look up at him. Dressed in a long black cloak that reached down to her feet, her slender body was completely free of any scars, and her skin was a flawless white...

She was completely exposed.

"... Huh!"

Unable to comprehend what he was seeing, Naoto let out a bewildered voice and thrust his chin forward, staring intently at the girl.

His mouth hung open, unable to close. He couldn't find the words to respond.

Clothes. There should have been clothes under the black cloak that wrapped around her slender body... but there were none. Not even a blouse, a skirt, or—no underwear whatsoever.

The only thing she wore was the black cloak. Without any shame about her appearance, the girl placed her hands on her bare hips and snorted softly.

"What are you staring at with that stupid face?. Are you...a pervert?"

Her tone clearly had a condescending ring to it.

I don't want to hear that from you, you exhibitionist. Naoto tried to respond, but the words caught in his throat.

Naoto's eyes caught the numbers floating above the girl's head. While her appearance was shocking enough, he was even more astonished by the numbers lined up above her.

The "abnormality" he had briefly noticed earlier was indeed a reality.

"E... eighty million!"

It's an outrageous number. No matter how many times he counted, it had eight digits. He never expected to see such a high figure above her.

However, it was clear that she was an anomaly. This was evident not only from the visible numbers but also from the extraordinary strength she had just shown when she kicked a man away.

“... What? I don’t understand.”

As Naoto stared wide-eyed at the numbers above her head, the girl raised her perfectly shaped eyebrows in confusion.

It was a natural reaction. Even though someone was right in front of him, and he was looking directly at that person, his gaze was inexplicably focused on an empty space.

Drawn back to her eyes, Naoto searched for words to deflect the situation. He didn’t think that even such an extraordinary girl would accept something as absurd as the numbers above her head.

His mind, frozen in shock, couldn’t come up with a good excuse, and Naoto’s mouth involuntarily spilled out his true feelings.

Naturally, Naoto's gaze dropped slightly. Translucent white skin. There was a feminine line to it...

The soft bulge that formed a shadow... was a bit hard to see. For a moment, he thought he heard a short intake of breath. Before he could understand what it was, the girl thrust her fist into Naoto's face.

"Naive!"

A moist voice leaked out. He hit me between the eyebrows. And he made a fist.

The punch was too powerful for a rebuttal, and Naoto stumbled back, covering his face with both hands.

It's annoying. She's not wearing any clothes, but she's still concerned about the size of her breasts. I wanted to hit her with all my might, but I wouldn't be able to win if I got blown away to the apartment complex behind her like the man in the suit from before, so I decided not to.

The girl seemed completely unconcerned about having been hit, and her artificial face returned to a blank, doll-like expression as she looked at Naoto.

'You're just getting in the way if you wander around here. Get out of here quickly.' |

"Go away? Who the hell do you think you are..."

"Ah, but."

Just as Naoto was about to retort with dissatisfaction, the girl cut him off and turned her head.

Her golden eyes were fixed on the pile of walls of the apartment complex that had just collapsed. Her gaze was fixed Squinted.

"It's too late now."

The sound of something hard being crunched echoed over the girl's nonchalant words. The man in the suit from before appeared, pushing up the pile of concrete. Naoto was left speechless.

The man's face had been transformed into something non-human.

In a word, it could be compared to an insect. His enlarged, protruding eyeballs were freed from their cramped sockets and transformed into dark red eyeballs that bulged out from his face. His nose was gone, replaced by the eyes of ants.

A mouth with jaws for crushing like a gnat takes up the lower half of the face. When

the jaws are opened wide in a threatening manner, countless fangs wriggle inside as if beckoning. there was.

"You've got to be kidding me... What the hell is this?"

He wondered if he was having a nightmare. If it was a daydream, he preferred a boring dream where he was staring at a strange girl in a deserted downtown area.

of Naoto, who was taken aback, a blonde girl wearing only a cloak turned to face the monster and quietly prepared herself. "As you can see, I'm a monster."

"What a calm thing to say! This is dangerous, we'd better run away..."

Naoto's advice was suddenly cut off as he pulled away.

moment, something whizzed by in front of Naoto with incredible speed and wind pressure. A moment later, the wall of the apartment complex behind him burst into pieces as if it had exploded. A thunderous noise was heard, and the blast, along with sand and dust, blew into the side of Naoto's face.

"No, uh... what?"

What had just happened.

He glanced sideways at the exploded apartment complex, then, urged by a premonition, turned his head in the opposite direction.

Standing with a suit against a gouged-out apartment complex is a bug man. His arms are stretched more than twice their original length, bending at unnatural angles.

The strangely stiff arms easily lifted the freshly crumbled wall of the apartment complex behind him, despite their slender and frail appearance. As his crimson eyes locked onto me, he moved his jaw, producing an unsettling clicking sound, and hurled a chunk of concrete.

"Whoa, this isn't a joke!"

Naoto cursed as a girl tugged at his arm, forcing him down. A flat piece of debris was thrown over his head, crashing into the wall of the apartment complex, causing it to crumble further.

The weight of the debris, combined with the speed and force behind the throw, was extraordinary. If the girl hadn't pulled on his arm, Naoto's head might have been severed from his body, crushed beneath the rubble.

"Great, thanks to you, I've given him extra weapons," the girl said, rising and tossing her long blonde hair.

"W-What? It's my fault?!"

The "weapons" she referred to must have been the piles of debris stacked there. If that's the case, she was the one who created them.

But now wasn't the time for complaints; there were more pressing matters at hand.

"Um, sorry about this. I'll pretend I didn't see anything and go straight home to sleep, so could you let me off this time...?"

His words trailed off.

The girl suddenly turned and kicked Naoto in the chest, sending him flying backward.

As the air was forced out of his lungs, Naoto hit the ground hard. Whether by luck or the girl's control, his body unexpectedly landed lightly on the dirt, just off the paved road.

Some soil got into his mouth when he rolled, but he soon realized how gentle the damage was when he looked up.

A sharp piece of debris was embedded where he had just stood, like some meaningless sculpture in a park. However, this was not meant to evoke art or provoke thought; it was born from a desire to kill in a crude and violent manner.

A chill crept into his temples. He reflected on his recklessness for stepping in so easily. This was bad. This was far too dangerous. He had no clue what was going on, but he knew he shouldn't have gotten involved.

When he heard another dull thud, he looked to see the girl gracefully dodging the debris, leaping away with elegance that was incomparable to his own. For a brief moment, he felt like she glanced his way...

(This is...?)

She might be trying to tell him to escape while he drew the attention. No, she must be wanting to say that for sure.

With a complete self-interpretation, Naoto dragged his aching body upright.

He felt there had to have been a better way for her to have kicked him, but to her, it was probably a way to protect him at that moment. What a kind-hearted girl. Although his entire body was in immense pain.

He should respect the girl's wishes and escape. Surely, that was what she wanted... or at least, it should be.

"Alright, I'll call for help right away...!" He stood up, turned around, and tried to run. However, as Naoto was about to look back, he froze again.

A heavy gust of wind sliced through right next to him again. He didn't even need to check what had flown by.

Just a few meters ahead, a streetlamp was snapped in half, with a white concrete wall embedded into the ground.

This time, there were no arms to pull him back or legs to kick him away. If Naoto had started running just a few seconds earlier, he would have been hit directly.

"W-What is that...?"

Naoto turned around. What happened to the idea of escaping while he had the chance? He realized it was a selfish interpretation, yet for a moment, he genuinely thought that.

The girl was still there. However, rather than protecting Naoto, she seemed to be waiting for an opening against the bug man.

"I can't focus on you right now. Take care of yourself."

The bug man made another unsettling clicking sound with his mouth, swinging his long arms back. Ignoring the direction of his joints, he grabbed a piece of rubble piled behind him.

"W-Wait a minute, I can't believe you're planning to...!" A dreadful thought came to him, almost naturally.

The bug man's crimson eyes were fixed on Naoto. With the piece of white rubble still in his elongated arms, he raised it high without hesitation. He swung it down powerfully, and the rubble soared toward Naoto with a menacing growl.

"Ahhh!"

Letting out a pathetic scream, Naoto desperately jumped to the side, throwing himself to the ground and crouching low.

Immediately afterward, a sound like an explosion erupted nearby. He instantly recognized it: the sound of the wall of the apartment complex collapsing, creating a massive hole.

A sixth sense compelled Naoto to lift his head in a panic. He spotted the girl immediately. With her long blonde hair fluttering, she raced like the wind—not toward Naoto, but toward the back of the building where she had slammed the bug man.

He understood the logic. He understood the meaning. She was trying to get behind that monster.

But that meant...

“I’m really the decoy!?”

Naoto shouted at the top of his lungs, momentarily shelving his earlier intention to flee.

The bug man hurled another piece of rubble at Naoto.

Fortunately, this time the debris seemed fragile, crumbling as it was thrown, so not much mass came flying at him. Even so, if it hit, it wouldn’t end well. Naoto rolled on the ground, trying to escape.

“Ow...”

He pushed himself up against the hard sidewalk.

In that moment, he heard a sharp, scream-like sound as someone inhaled sharply.

He reflexively turned around. The bug man's arm had stretched further, bending like a whip, and had caught the girl's leg as she tried to sneak around behind him.

Right, Naoto clicked his tongue. He could see in all directions even before the bug’s face fully changed; he could check to his left with just his left eye while still looking at Naoto.

The man pulled strongly on his arm, lifting it. The girl’s body was thrown up, and the man swung his arm down in one swift motion.

“Stop it!”

“Ugh...!”

Naoto’s shout and the girl’s groan were drowned out by a powerful gust of wind.

Moments later, the girl's small body was slammed down to the ground with a dull thud. Fortunately, it landed on the overgrown grass. If she had been just a little off, she would have hit the concrete wall.

Even so, she was struck down with enough force to bounce slightly. Though she struggled to move, she knew she couldn't afford to lose consciousness.

Was the bug man feeling triumphant, having captured his prey? He casually turned away from Naoto, facing the still-down girl. As he forcefully yanked his arm, her body slid effortlessly along the ground, crashing into the withered street.

"Ugh...!"

The dull impact sound and the girl's small cry of pain filled the air.

At that moment, Naoto took off running. He swiftly changed direction and began to run away from the girl.

(This is the only chance... the only chance!)

For these few seconds, the bug man's attention was completely focused on the girl. Naoto had intruded here as an irregularity; the man's original target was the girl.

It shouldn't matter if someone like Naoto tried to disappear.

He ran and leaped over the bushes, sliding into one of the collapsed apartment buildings that had a large hole in it.

Inside, surrounded by thick walls and ceilings blocking out the sunlight, it was gloomy and dark. The deep shadows quickly concealed Naoto's figure. The sound of his footsteps running straight away soon disappeared into the darkness.

...The girl watched this from the corner of her eye.

Once Naoto's figure had completely vanished into the building, she remained on the ground, a faint smile appearing on her face. It was a smile that carried a hint of self-mockery, yet at the same time, it felt like relief.

It was a look that carried a mix of emotions.

Not long ago, someone had told the girl that humans are weak and cowardly. Now, she remembered those words and understood them deeply.

The hand gripping her thin ankle tightened. It was that dreadful monster's hand. Even though it was already losing its shape as a human, it still had five fingers that gripped the girl firmly and wouldn't let go.

The elongated arm lifted her body into the air again. Her small frame seemed to float up, cutting through the air.

The girl twisted her body to escape the persistent grip, but the fingers digging into her ankle wouldn't release her.

Swinging his arm high and large, the man aimed once more.

The grotesque eyes were fixed on the wall of the crumbling building that had initially embedded his body. He cracked his jaw and flexed his entire body as he swung his arm down in one fluid motion, still holding onto his prey.

And then...

"Whoa!!!"

Naoto burst out from behind the rubble and struck the bug man's head with a heavy, hard object. A dull, metallic sound echoed.

Using the recoil, he swung again. This time, he struck the side of the man's head, feeling an unpleasant sensation as something seemed to shatter in his hand.

The bug man's deformed head slightly distorted as he tilted his body and began to fall slowly.

With his falling body, the fingers gripping the girl's ankle released their hold.

Freed from the air, the girl's body plummeted toward the ground, her long cape billowing noisily in the wind.

Chasing after her, Naoto stretched out his arms.

Their eyes met—golden eyes.

As Naoto braced himself in front of the partially collapsed building, the girl's body fell into his outstretched arms.

"Ugh... uh, uh..."

The weight was less than he had prepared for, and Naoto looked at what he had caught with a puzzled expression.

He could feel the luxurious texture of the cape against his skin, and sensed the softness of her slender body. There was nothing odd about her shoulders, arms, or legs. Only a bit of dirt on her cheeks and cape; there was no bleeding, not even a small scratch.

"You seem to be okay?"

Naoto asked the girl he was holding, intending to check on her condition.

There was no way she could be unscathed. He thought she should have been injured, but he set that doubt aside for the moment. After all, it was far more unrealistic for a human face to become insect-like or for a small girl to kick a man hard enough to shatter a concrete wall.

The girl remained silent for a while, not moving. She wasn't unconscious. Since being thrown into the air, her large, jewel-like eyes had been fixed on Naoto.

"Are you okay?"

Seeing her so silent worried Naoto, prompting him to ask again.

Finally, after blinking once behind her disheveled bangs, the girl moved her lips slightly.

"...Why?"

Her response was a whispering question. Naoto paused for a moment, furrowing his brows.

"What do you mean?"

"I thought you ran away. But you came back."

"Well..."

So that's what it was. Naoto slumped his shoulders in defeat.

Ignoring his reaction, the girl shifted her gaze to the side. What she saw was a red object thrown to the corner of the sidewalk. It was the fire extinguisher that Naoto had carried and used to strike the bug man's head with force.

"There's no way I could leave a girl behind. After all, you're my lifesaver." Naoto replied with exasperation, looking at the girl who stared at the fire extinguisher in confusion.

Her golden gaze returned to him, blinking once more. Naoto thought her eyes looked doll-like—large and vibrant, yet somehow distant in warmth and emotion.

"You say strange things. I haven't done anything that warrants your gratitude," the girl said in a tone that was somewhat flat and emotionless, mirroring the emptiness of her eyes.

It sounded somewhat dismissive, and Naoto felt a slight irritation.

"Don't say strange things yourself. Do you think I didn't notice? It was the same from the beginning, and it's still true now."

The fierce kick she delivered when she jumped in had completely stopped the man's attack against Naoto. Even after that, during the subsequent close-range attack, she had pulled his arm and ultimately kicked him away, protecting Naoto from direct hits.

The rubble that fell after she moved away was something Naoto couldn't have dodged with mere reflexes. Yet, miraculously, not a single piece had struck him because their trajectories had been diverted by something.

Naoto couldn't comprehend how such a thing was possible, but there was no one else who could have saved him but this girl.

Ignoring Naoto's observations, the girl turned her gaze away again.

Was she embarrassed? If so, it made her seem more like a typical girl, which Naoto found somewhat admirable.

However, if she wanted to display her femininity, she should first reconsider her current clothing situation.

Following her gaze and looking up, Naoto furrowed his brows again. This time, not from confusion, but from discomfort.

Next to the piled-up rubble lay the figure of the fallen man. Above his rolled head...

The number floating in front of him was, as expected, '0.'

As if he had finally remembered this fact, a noise ran through the man's body. Lines, like those on a malfunctioning TV, crossed over him, and his entire body flickered a few times like a dying lightbulb.

Then the transformation began. Just as white paper is dyed, the man's body turned black from the edges inward. A sound like sand being gathered could be faintly heard.

In just a few seconds, the man's body had transformed into nothing but a black mass.

This was complete death.

No longer was this anyone. No longer a human being with a name or a birthplace. There were no fragments of such information left—just a mere black object.

This was the form of a human that Naoto recognized as having become '0.'

In this state, only Naoto could see him. The eyeball that sat in the eye socket. The crystalline lens that sparkled behind it. The 'Hunter's Eye' made the corpse appear as nothing but a solid black object to Naoto.

And this scene, this utterly disgusting scene... pulled a forgotten memory from the depths of Naoto's mind, like pulling on a thread.

That distant yet close memory was always accompanied by fear.

At that time, Naoto stood alone, vividly frozen in place.

He thought his feet were leaking. There was a nauseating smell permeating the area. Perhaps because of that, he couldn't even clearly recall what time it was or whether it was bright or dark.

What he distinctly remembered was an overwhelming terror piercing through him. It was terrifying. So very frightening.

Forgetting to cry, tremble, or scream, he barely kept his heart and lungs functioning, and in that state, he just stared at what lay close by... a black mass.

It had a human shape. No, it resembled a human form.

That was probably the head. It protruded slightly and was a bit round. If so, the opposite side must be the feet. The part that seemed to float slightly above the rest of the mass must be the arms.

Just a moment ago, it had been the figure of Naoto's mother.

The smell was overwhelming. It made him feel dizzy. The scent of iron. The rusted iron smell made him nauseous.

No, this was different.

It was the smell of blood.

Right next to the rolled-up black mass was something wrapped in a dull sheen, still wet. It was soaked through, yet still exposed a sharpness that couldn't be hidden... glimmering ominously, it was...

"...When will you finally release me? Can you put me down already, you pervert?"

With a tone that was more exasperated than cold, Naoto's awareness was brought back to reality.

"Oh, uh, sorry!"

As he caught the half-lidded gaze that seemed to accuse him, Naoto hurriedly lowered the girl's body to the ground as gently as possible.

That's when he realized.

"Who are you calling a pervert?!"

"You, of course. Who else could it be?"

"No one else! That's not the issue! I'm telling you, I'm not a pervert! And I'm definitely not letting you call me one!"

He almost added "this naked, caped girl" but decided against it, keeping that thought to himself.

No matter how excessive her perversion and her incomprehensible fashion sense, she was still his lifesaver and a girl he had just met. It already felt a bit too late for that, but he wanted to maintain a certain attitude.

Ignoring Naoto's delicate concern, the girl casually placed her hands on her hips, exposing her body without a care.

Before he knew it, the sun had completely set. In the deserted apartment complex where tall buildings loomed, the enchanting colors of the lingering twilight were regrettably not very visible.

Far off, the city lights began to flicker on. It was already that time. While it was still dim enough to observe the surroundings, the night would soon fall. Once that happened, the apartment complex without any streetlights would be enveloped in darkness.

Without showing any signs of feeling cold in the chilling air, the girl stepped barefoot onto the cold pavement.

She stopped in front of the dark mass that had once been a monster and, just a little while ago, a human being.

"It's dead."

"...Yeah. Looks like it."

He didn't want to look at it too closely. Naoto replied curtly, shifting his gaze from the girl's feet to her swaying golden hair.

That hair swayed like a silk ribbon as the girl turned to look over her shoulder.

"Oh. You're surprisingly calm, considering you just killed someone." Her tone remained flat, but there was an unexpected hint of surprise in her voice.

It was surprising that she found this unexpected. Naoto grimaced as if he had swallowed something bitter.

"You've got to be joking. I'm actually pretty shaken up," he said.

"Hmm. Is that so?"

As he spoke, he thought it was a rather disingenuous remark. Perhaps she thought so too, as her response was a simple acknowledgment that contained neither agreement nor doubt.

Avoiding the girl's gaze, Naoto let his eyes wander, bringing a hand to his head. He thought to himself that it couldn't be helped, even though no one had actually said anything.

(Naturally, I would be shaken up. There's no way I could stay calm after seeing something like this.)

With a sideways glance, Naoto turned his eyes toward the object.

A black mass lying carelessly on the ground. No matter how much he had seen the man in his human form, after witnessing this state, it was impossible to think of him as "human." At this point, he had become "an object."

Was it heartless of him to feel this way?

"Well, considering what he looked like earlier, it's not surprising to think he was human."

"Huh?"

Startled by the words that seemed to see through his thoughts, Naoto looked up.

For a moment, he didn't understand the meaning. Could it be that this girl also saw the corpse as a black mass?

But he quickly caught on. The man had lost his human face even before he died and lost his form. That was likely what she meant.

The girl intertwined her white fingers with the ends of her long blonde hair and let it go gently.

"Anyway, he had already deteriorated too much to be saved. Sooner or later, he would have ended up like this."

(Was that... a consolation?)

It was impossible to tell if it was a soliloquy or something else from the girl's calm tone. Naoto knew too little about her to gauge her feelings.

"And then?"

She stepped closer, stopping right in front of him, lifting her chin slightly as she looked up at Naoto with a somewhat haughty expression.

Her large eyes, with their upward-sloping corners, sparkled. Naoto flinched at the color of her gaze, so close.

They were beautiful eyes. The golden irises had an ethereal quality as if peering in from another reality, and it felt as though his soul could be drawn in if he stared too long.

"Can you tell me? Who are you?"

"Who am I...? I'm just a passing high school student."

The girl's eyes sparkled with a hint of irritation.

"A mere high school student wouldn't just happen to wander into such a remote place."

"Well, that's..."

Naoto hesitated, unsure of how to respond. He had seen strange, powerful numbers above her head. He didn't want to admit that. After all, she was someone who found herself in such an abnormal situation. She would likely accept his explanation without question, but that would only complicate matters further, which he didn't want.

"More importantly, what was that guy? At one point, his face completely stopped looking human. You must know something, right?"

Clearing his throat lightly, Naoto forcibly switched the topic back to himself.

The girl showed no signs of being offended by the change and responded with a simple "Ah," ready to answer. But just as she was about to continue with her response, an unsettling sound interrupted the moment.

"Tss!"

Kiti-kiti.

A faint, unpleasant sound like an insect crawling and wriggling. The sound struggled busily, making another sound like it was forcibly tearing something apart. Naoto was the first to see and understand what it was.

"Ugh..."

Disgust escaped his lips.

A blackened corpse, no longer moving.

A sharp claw was plunged into its head, tearing it apart, and a bug-like creature the size of a human head was wriggling. From inside... from inside the dead man's head, the bug was crawling out like an adult emerging from a cocoon.

It was a dull blue color, with a flat body with many segmented legs and a creepy appearance. A

raised, blood-red eyeball was glaring from its head. It was more of a 'creature' than an insect. It had broken through what was once a human and was crawling out, its large jaws spreading open like bared fangs.

"Get out of the way!"

His body moved instinctively. Naoto pulled the girl's arm hard, almost reflexively. He stepped forward instead. He raised his arm, which had bounced up due to the recoil, to his shoulder as a shield.

The next moment, as if pulled violently by an invisible force, his right arm, which he had used as a shield, was flung backward. At the same time, he felt a shock as if he had been pushed away at the shoulder. But neither sensation lasted even a second. He was immediately freed from all interference, and...

Naoto lost weight from his right side.

"...Huh?"

What happened? Did he not know, or did he not want to know?

Losing his balance, Naoto took a step back and moved his neck as if it were being twisted by someone.

He looked at his right shoulder. It was gone. The thing that should have been there, wasn't.

"A, ah, agh... uh, ah, ah!"

Naoto's whole body began to tremble violently. As if something frozen was slowly melting, a slimy liquid slid out from the cut end of his missing arm. Gradually, the liquid grew thicker and spilled out, quickly spreading a red stain at Naoto's feet.



"I was careless. It had already hatched inside its body..."

Behind Naoto, the girl whispered, scooping up a splash of red that had flown onto her white cheek with her finger. She licked the red that wet her finger with her protruding tongue and swallowed it. The girl's lips smiled seductively at the taste, but neither that burning expression nor the meaning of her words reached Naoto.

Fear, pain, and such emotions had long since been blown away to the other side of his thoughts.

His body just moved on its own, and he grabbed his missing right shoulder with his left hand. His little finger touched the wet flesh. The slight sensation brought him to his senses. The wound was slightly crushed. It had been torn apart. By the tough jaws of that disgusting creature.

Kiti-kiti.

Disgust made Naoto raise his gaze. The creature had returned to the front of Naoto. It landed on its broken black head with its thin legs and clapped its large jaws as if to show them off. Its jaws were covered in blood.

As if to do it again, it opened its jaws wide, and the soft flesh beneath its bluish-gray hard skin trembled and rippled its body. In response to the movement, transparent wings spread out on the creature's back.

He hadn't looked closely before, but he must have flown in on those wings. And then it had torn off Naoto's arm.

At the edge of his vision, a little further away, lay an arm still wearing a familiar uniform.

Thrown away, it looked so unreal that it seemed like a poorly made imitation.

"Ug, uh... a, ah..."

Naoto groaned in agony from deep within his clenched teeth as he looked at the creature. He thought he heard a voice behind him. It was probably the girl who should be behind him.

But he couldn't hear it. He couldn't understand.

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered here.

"Ah... haah, haah... ah, uh... uaaaa"

Ignoring his ragged breathing, an impulse surged up within him.

As if the blood was flowing back from his torn shoulder, his vision turned completely red.

He could see the creature flying in his red-invaded vision. At the same time, the red burst within Naoto.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

His throat roared, and his feet ran.

As he dashed through the cold wind, the creature in the sea of red vision spread its wings and flew up to meet him.

Just before it flapped its wings, Naoto's left hand grabbed them.

He grabbed them all together, pulled the creature's body down from the dead man's body where it had landed, and swung it up forcefully, slamming it into the ground. There was a sound like something was being crushed. The creature's wings were torn and remained in Naoto's hand. Naoto threw them away and... his memory faded there.

The lifted eyelids felt incredibly, incredibly heavy.

Naoto didn't even understand why he had opened his eyes. It felt like he might have been thinking of something, but it could also have been a natural reflex, like opening his mouth to take in oxygen.

Naoto opened his eyes, as if pulled up by a drifting consciousness, and he absently reflected the deep navy night sky in his gaze.

(It's night...)

He could see the moon in the distance. The white, round moon seemed to look down on Naoto like a mirror.

He wanted to sit up. But his body wouldn't move. It felt completely powerless.

It was strange that he could lift his eyelids at all; he didn't even know how to move a single fingertip. His sensations and consciousness were hazy, his body felt extremely cold, and heavy.

(Ah, I see...)

Finally, Naoto understood why his body felt so heavy. There were multiple pieces of rubble resting on top of him. The cold debris that pressed down on him was so heavy that he couldn't breathe.

"Ugh..."

He tried to shift to regain his breath, but his lungs wouldn't cooperate. Instead of inhaling, a viscous liquid rose up and overflowed from Naoto's mouth before he could brace himself.

What dampened his lips and chin was blood—warm, sticky blood mixed with some other bodily fluids. It carried a nauseating smell.

As he heard a hissing sound, the warmth seemed to drain away from his body, slowly, slowly. Like sinking into a bottomless swamp, Naoto experienced the sensation of himself fading away.

(So this is... is this dying?)

He murmured in his heart, feeling as if it were someone else's business.

(So this is how it ends...)

If that moon were a mirror, would he see the numbers above his head gradually decreasing? How many numbers were left now? Would it be lower than the number for today's Isa?

How much longer until he reached "0"?

Would he also turn into a black mass like that suited man? He couldn't confirm his own death, as he couldn't see it himself.

His vision, which had been filled with moonlight, gradually darkened and lost its light.

He could almost hear the sound of the numbers decreasing.

In the midst of this, Naoto thought of his childhood friend, who was probably preparing dinner now.

(Ah... this is bad. She's going to be angry if I've gotten my clothes this dirty.)

He didn't even know if he could go home. No, the situation was such that he couldn't possibly go home.

However, Naoto was only thinking of ways to procure a new uniform without being found by Haruka, and excuses to lighten her worries as much as possible.

As if to announce reality to Naoto, a cold wind blew.

In that instant, Naoto's vision regained light. Aware that it was the light of the east, he squinted at the new light that had appeared in his field of view.

A shining gold—just like the color of that girl's hair and eyes.

Still completely unclothed except for a black cloak draped over her slender form, she stood in front of him, blocking the moonlight that fell on Naoto's face.

(Are you okay...?)

It seemed she wasn't injured. The numbers above her head hadn't decreased from the last memory Naoto had, maintaining a strangely high value. He almost wanted to ask for some of it.

A sense of relief descended in Naoto's chest. He couldn't remember how things had come to this point, but after Naoto had been buried in rubble, it seemed that the insect hadn't attacked her or inflicted any serious wounds.

However, the words that could have conveyed his relief did not turn into sound. He could hardly breathe.

"You don't need to worry about me. Rather, it's overwhelmingly you who should be concerned, don't you think??"

Naoto felt an urge to laugh at the calm girl's words.

Having his right arm bitten off, buried in rubble, unable to move, and on the verge of death—it was completely true, just as the girl said.

What puzzled him was how his concern for her had somehow been communicated. But if it could be conveyed without words, that was a relief. He wanted to ask her about whatever technique she was using, given that she surely knew something about the situation.

(What happened to that insect earlier?)

With this question in mind, he barely moved his eyes side to side. From here, he couldn't see what was happening around him well. After all, it wasn't just the position or place that made it hard to see.

"That thing ran away. After it buried you there," she replied. It seemed the reason Naoto was buried in the rubble was indeed that insect.

Understanding, Naoto exhaled a breath that felt like he was squeezing it out, and the girl looked down at him from her haughty posture, pausing for a moment before whispering a question.

"Why?"

Immediately, Naoto recalled the moment when the insect had flown out from the man's head. He furrowed his brow, trembling. Instead of words, he shook his head.

It was more of a slight movement than a vigorous shake, but it seemed to have been communicated to the girl.

He didn't know the reason. He didn't even know if there was a reason. His body had just instinctively moved when he felt danger.

The price of that decision, however, had been far more devastating than he could have imagined.

“...I see.”

The girl's soft murmur fell like a whisper.

Her expression was emotionless like the moon, and from the gaze she fixed on him, it was unclear what she was thinking.

It was hard to tell what she was thinking. However, from her drooping shoulders and raised eyebrows, Naoto could somewhat sense that she understood.

There was no need for her to look at him with such a thoughtless, dog-like gaze. Naoto returned her look with as much dissatisfaction as he could muster, tinged with contempt behind his bewilderment.

The golden eyes he looked up at suddenly narrowed, as if she was pondering something... or perhaps smiling.

(Tch... I really don't get her.)

He felt as if he were being teased. But that feeling, along with his frustration, was swept away by a sudden wave of understanding.

His body felt even heavier now, as if he might sink into the rubble at any moment.

He could vaguely sense what this meant. He would soon reach "0." It was almost over.

As Naoto's consciousness faded again, he heard the girl's voice close by, as if whispering to him.

“Do you want to be saved?”

He thought it was a strange question. Naoto laughed, though his expression remained unchanged.

“Of course...”

Struggling to lift his voice from beneath the heavy rubble pressing down on his chest, Naoto squeezed out the words. It was hoarse and weak, and he couldn't tell if it even sounded like a voice. But he continued.

Did he want to be saved? The answer was obvious.

“I want to be saved... of course...”

Desperately trying to focus his blurred vision, Naoto searched for the golden eyes.

The girl was right beside him. He glared up at her, who was looking down at him as if peering into a well.

Her eyes were beautiful. His agonized face was reflected in the mesmerizing golden surface.

Narrowing her eyes, the girl smiled.

“Well then, I’ll help you. Become a servant of ‘Raquel Alcard.’”

While whispering sweetly, the blonde girl knelt before Naoto, the hem of her cloak swaying gently. Her white skin, woven only from a piece of cloth, glowed even brighter under the moonlight.

Her delicate hands, like those of a black doll, reached out to Naoto like an angel offering salvation. Cold fingertips brushed against his cheek. As she held him gently with both hands, she urged him to lift his face.

“In exchange... obtain the ‘Azure.’ And then I—”

Continuing in a faint voice, she let her long eyelashes softly cover her golden eyes.

Slowly, her face drew closer. Her slightly parted lips looked incredibly soft, and behind them, a bright red tongue glistened.

As she inhaled, her mouth opened wide. In a fleeting moment, Naoto caught sight of her sharply gleaming fangs. But before he could comprehend the meaning of it, her lips touched—

Naoto's... neck.

Immediately, a sharp pain shot through him. The dulled sensation suddenly came alive, as if something were piercing his skin and flesh for the last time. His entire body tensed, and he instinctively tried to resist.

However, Naoto's body did not move. Holding down Naoto's immobile body, the girl pressed her lips to Naoto's neck and sucked strongly on the heat that overflowed from there.

A gulp, it sounded so close. With each sound, Naoto's consciousness faded further away. The sound repeated over and over, sucking something out of Naoto. It sounded like a heartbeat, and... eventually, it dragged Naoto's consciousness completely into darkness.

Chapter 2 — Immortality

I woke up to the scent of sunlight.

My vision, still clouded with sleep, took in the familiar sight of my room. A western-style room surrounded by white walls, and blue curtains draped over the east-facing window.

Yawning, Naoto stretched and pressed his face into the worn pillow, curling up in the warm blanket.

I wanted to go back to sleep. I was still so sleepy.

Wait, what time is it?

“...Wait, what time is it!?”

Jumping up in a hurry, Naoto snatched the alarm clock from the nightstand.

Somehow, it felt like the sun was already high in the sky, far past the usual alarm time. Maybe Haruka had gone to school early on an errand. If so, I might be late.

Having come to this realisation in a flash, Naoto also suddenly noticed many other things.

“So, that’s it... today’s a holiday?”

The hour and minute hands of the clock he was holding pointed to around nine-thirty. But on the calendar section that was displayed along with the time, it read ‘SUN’ in red letters.

His relief was fleeting and hollow. More importantly, there were many other things he needed to pay attention to.

First, his clothes. Usually, when Naoto went to bed, he would change into a T-shirt and sweatpants. Unless there was a very special reason, he would never go to bed in his school uniform. It made him feel uneasy and like he hadn’t really slept.

And yet, on this day, Naoto was wearing his uniform. Not only the pants but also the jacket. The uniform was terribly dirty and torn in many places, and it was in no condition to be worn to school.

The right sleeve was especially bad. It was torn just below the shoulder, leaving it in a pitiful half-sleeved state.

Naoto furrowed his brow. He looked at the clock in his hand again. It was his beloved clock that always woke him up from his dreams with its noisy sound.

He was holding the clock with his right hand.

“....I wonder if this is a dream or reality.”

He muttered this question to no one, as there was no one else in the room.

His memory was surprisingly clear. He remembered it perfectly. Yesterday.

He had seen a girl running away and a man chasing her on his way home from school, and he had chased after them. The events that followed, which were like the climax of an action movie, were so unreal that he couldn't believe they were real. But he couldn't believe it was a dream either. The taste of the air he had breathed then, the unpleasant atmosphere he had felt. The tension that ran down his spine and the way it grazed his cheeks.

(The pressure of the rubble, too. I can still remember it all. The horrifying, god-defying pain when the creature that emerged from the man instantly tore my arm off, and the terror that surpassed it.)

Gently placing the watch on the bed, Naoto stared at his empty hand. It was a normal, flesh-colored arm. Five fingers. He could flex his fingers and make a fist.

‘What... is going on?’

My right arm was definitely there. So was it a dream? It's ridiculous to think I had my arm torn off by a strange monster. If that wasn't the case, I'd gladly accept that explanation.

But the state of my uniform denied that. The tattered uniform clearly told the tale of a violent encounter. The stains weren't just dirt or dust. There were traces of dried blood as well.

And above all, the sleeve was torn in the same place where my arm had been torn off.

(Then why do I still have my arm...? No, how did I even get back? Why was I still in my uniform when I went to bed? What about Haruka? What about that girl?)

Countless questions swirled around in his head without any answers. But there was no one to answer any of them.

“....Well, I guess I'll get something to drink.”

Letting his arm fall limply, Naoto let out a deep sigh. Despite having just woken up, he felt incredibly tired.

Whether it was a dream or not, he decided it didn't matter for now. He would wash his face and make some tea. If he didn't, his mind would be completely worn out.

(Come to think of it, I haven't opened the summer-harvested tea leaves I bought earlier. Maybe I'll open them today.)

Trying to think of something pleasant, Naoto headed to the bathroom, thinking about the fine tea leaves he had been saving.

He tossed the dirty jacket onto the washing machine and turned on the faucet. Remembering that he had been sleeping in a dirty state, he washed his hands thoroughly before splashing a handful of water on his face.

His groggy head felt a little clearer.

He pushed his wet bangs up with both hands and looked up.

“...Eh?”

Naoto stopped moving, staring at his reflection in the mirror.

It was his usual face. The water he had just splashed was running down his forehead, cheeks, and chin. His slightly dusty hair was tousled.

And above it, the number ‘0’ was floating.

‘One?’

It was ‘0’. Quickly rubbing his eyes with the hand that had been holding his bangs, he looked again. He glanced around at various unrelated places before looking again.

The number didn’t change. The number floating above Naot’s head was still ‘0’.

The number above a person's head represents something like their life force. The higher the number, the more abundant their life force, and the lower the number, the weaker they are. In other words, ‘0’ means...”

"If the number of a dead person is '0', then that means they're not alive."

"What the... what?! What the hell is going on?!"

Naoto slammed his hands on the sink, leaning forward sharply. He brought his face as close to the mirror as it would go.

No matter how many times he looked, it was the same.

"Impossible..."

A voice escaped him in shock. This couldn’t be real.

He instinctively recalled the man he encountered yesterday, whose face had transformed like an insect. The number above his head had also been "0."

A chill ran down his spine. He trembled at the thought that he had become a creature similar to that man.

However, just then, that fear was unexpectedly snatched away from him.

"That's noisy. Could you please be a little quieter?"

With a hint of irritation in her tone, a voice spoke as the door opened with a light creak.

What door? The bathroom door.

In an instant, Naoto's thoughts froze. Was understanding really this rare? What even was common sense?

Turning toward the sound like a spring-loaded mechanism, Naoto's eyes widened in fear at the sight that should not have been there.

Come to think of it, he remembered hearing the sound of a shower when he entered the bathroom. Why hadn't he found that strange? Of course! Why would he think someone was taking a shower while he was asleep?

There stood... a girl.

Her wet body and hair clung to her, droplets dripping from her fingertips as she stepped calmly from the bathroom into the changing area, steam enveloping her. Her long hair, golden in color, shimmered under the bathroom lights. She tucked a strand behind her ear and, after glancing left and right, asked, "Is there something to dry off with?"

With a tone reminiscent of asking a waiter for the daily special at a fancy restaurant, the girl arrogantly asked Naoto.

She acted in a way that showcased her noble birth. She had the air of a princess from some small European kingdom, fitting for an ancient castle.

But Naoto had no time to think about that now.

"Wha—..."

It was as if his soul, which had flown away, had suddenly returned.

In short, he was panicking.

His facial muscles twitched as he was overwhelmed by the electrical signals racing around in his brain...

"Ahhh!"

Naoto screamed like a girl and fled back to his room without looking back.

The girl's eyes widened in surprise as she picked up the cup.

Apparently, she liked it.

"Well, thanks."

Feeling a little better, Naoto exhaled. Now, there were a ton of things he wanted to ask this girl.

"So... first of all, I want to ask. Who are you?"

"How rude."

"Huh!?" Naoto snapped back, irritated by the unexpected retort. The blonde girl looked down at him with condescending eyes.

"Isn't it polite to introduce yourself first when asking someone's name? Or are you a lowly dog that doesn't know even the most basic manners?"

A smooth insult flew at him. Her cold eyes seemed to be tinged with a hint of contempt.

Naoto felt a vein in his temple throb. If he was a lowly dog, then what about the fact that she was drinking the tea he made and complimenting it? He wanted to ask, but Naoto swallowed his words, realizing it wouldn't get him anywhere.

"... Naoto Kurogane. I'm a second-year student at Shinkawahama High and I live in this room." He replied flatly, looking at the girl to see if that was enough. The girl returned the cup to its saucer with a composed expression.

"My name is Raquel Alucard. I'm a vampire," she replied casually, leaving Naoto speechless. Staring intently at the girl, Raquel, or rather, unable to look away, he asked, squeezing out the words.

"Vamp...ire?"

"It means immortal. You're so ignorant."

"I know that! That's not what I mean! What kind of a joke is that self-introduction? Are you making fun of me?" Kicking his feet against the table and ruffling his hair, Naoto stood up and raised his voice sharply.

Vampire. A vampire. Now that explained her absurdly high life force, the ridiculous action scene from last night, and even her bsarre outfit. It all fit.

"Of course I am. Because you're stupid."

"What did you say!?"

"Don't shout. I might catch your stupidity." Raquel made an exaggerated gesture of stepping back, her face twisted in disgust. Her eyes, which seemed to look at him as if he were something dirty, only fueled Naoto's irritation.

"You're a trespasser who broke into someone else's house and you have the nerve to act so arrogant. You realize you wouldn't have any grounds to complain if you got kicked out, right...?"

"You saw it, didn't you?"

Raquel calmly silenced Naoto's aggressive words. Perhaps it wasn't her words but her gaze that had subdued him. Her large, clear golden eyes seemed to see right through Naoto, and their intense pressure made him feel intimidated.

"What did you see, exactly?"

"The 'abnormality'," she replied.

Naoto instinctively gulped, swallowing the saliva that had accumulated in his mouth. Raquel continued to stare at him.

"You were surprised to see me yesterday, weren't you? It must have been something abnormal that you don't encounter in your daily life... No, you can still see it now. Am I wrong?"

When asked, Naoto carefully closed his mouth. He didn't want her to notice him clenching his teeth.

As she said, Naoto had indeed seen it. Or rather, he could still see it now. An abnormality, something that was definitely not normal for an ordinary human. The extraordinary number hovering above Raquel's head, reaching eight digits.

"What happened to your 'eye'?" Raquel's question made Naoto feel like a bird caught in a trap.

At the same time, he realized something. This strange self-proclaimed vampire girl wasn't just speculating based on Naoto's actions and words from the night before. She knew.

"You... what do you know?"

"Well, I know quite a bit. Or rather, I should say I can know. After all, I'm connected to you."

"What do you mean?" Naoto's expression turned suspicious. Raquel's golden eyes glanced at him, almost incredulously.

"You keep asking questions. Don't you ever think for yourself?"

"Shut up! Just tell me already!"

Frustrated, Naoto blurted out. He felt he was being a bit too nonchalant, but given that he understood nothing about the current situation, he couldn't afford to waste time putting on airs.

A sigh escaped Raquel's lips.

"Honestly, you're like a moth to a flame. And on top of that, you seem to have a terrible memory. Have you forgotten what happened between us last night?"

"What do you mean... what happened?"

The only thing he could recall was nearly being killed by that insect-faced man. Just as he was about to retort, Naoto suddenly realized something. After almost being killed by the insect-faced man, what happened next? His consciousness was hazy, making it hard to remember clearly. But he woke up unable to move, and right beside him was Raquel. When he became aware of his impending death, what had occurred?

Naoto pressed his hand, which had been tangled in his hair, against his neck.

"You bit my neck, didn't you? You had some weird teeth. And then you drank something..."

"Let me enlighten you once more, poor little dog. I am a vampire. What I drank wasn't just anything; it was your blood."

Naoto knew from what he'd read that when a vampire drank someone's blood, certain consequences followed.

"So... what does that mean? Does that mean I was bitten by you yesterday and... became a vampire?"

"Not yet. You're not a complete vampire yet. You're dead but still functioning. You're a sort of in-between existence."

"Dead... So I'm dead, huh?"

"Well, you are dead." Raquel's blunt confirmation stunned him. At the same time, a sense of indignation welled up within him. It wasn't fair. It was absurd, irrational.

"Wait a minute. You said back then that you would help me, right?!"

This was just before he had his blood sucked. His consciousness had been hazy, but he remembered that clearly.

Raquel nodded casually at Naoto, who leaned forward.

"Yes, I did."

"But I'm dead, right!?"

"I've been telling you that."

"Doesn't that mean you didn't save me!?"

"Would you rather have died then?"

"I... I guess..."

Naoto had no answer to that. He leaned back, defeated. It was true that if it weren't for Raquel, he wouldn't be sitting here drinking tea now. Although, if it weren't for Raquel, he probably wouldn't have come to this abandoned apartment complex either.

Raquel took another sip of her tea and placed the cup back on the table.

"Kurogane Naoto, you died last night. But you are alive. Why? Because you are living using my life."

"...I don't really understand what that means."

"To put it simply, you and I share 'my' life. That's why I can understand some things about you, and as long as I'm alive, you won't die. But if my life ends, so will yours."

"So... does that mean I'll be like this until you die? Neither alive nor dead, just in-between?"

"Not quite."

"What do you mean, not quite!?"

That was an unexpected response. Raquel's nonchalant answer quickly dispelled the seriousness that Naoto had felt just moments before.

"You can only stay in this in-between state for a year. In a year, you will transform into a complete vampire."

"A year... a complete vampire. What does that mean?"

"You won't be human anymore. You'll probably crave human blood, and you may not be able to resist attacking people like I do now. Maybe... no, you'll probably attack someone. The person most likely to be a victim would be the person closest to you."

From Raquel's words, Naoto understood one thing: if he became a complete vampire, Haruka would be in danger. By none other than Naoto's own hand.

The "person closest to you" that Raquel mentioned could only mean Haruka. He might even kill her.

He couldn't bear the thought of Haruka dying for even a moment. He remembered the blackened mass he had seen last night. If Haruka were to become that object, lying on the cold road, right in front of his eyes.

As he thought about it, Naoto found himself clenching his fists tightly, to the point where his nails dug into his palms.

"What the hell are you talking about...? If I'm going to become something so messed up, then it doesn't make any sense for you to have saved me! Don't screw with me, what have you done to me!"

The angry words seemed to spill out of his throat on their own. He didn't want to take them back. A burning rage distorted Naoto's expression as he wanted to lash out.

"Calm down. And call me 'Lady Raquel', servant."

"Shut up! I'm trying to have a serious conversation with you!"

"So am I." Raquel's voice grew stronger, reprimanding him. "Listen to me. In a year, you won't be human anymore. Maybe it's more accurate to say that you won't be 'you' anymore... but anyway, you have a year. So during that time, obtain the Azure."

"... 'Azure?'"

It was a word he had never heard before, and Naoto frowned more than ever.

Raquel nodded slightly, as if to encourage him. Her long hair swayed like luxurious fabric.

"Azure refers to the power of the origin."

Her clear voice began to seep into the air, creating a mysterious aura that transcended the simple term of an enigmatic girl.

Although she looked like a girl of the same age, she had an otherworldly quality as she gazed at Naoto.

"It exists everywhere, yet nowhere. It's a power that affects all living beings, as well as everything from time to grains of sand. Thus, it transforms all 'possibilities' into 'realities.'"

"Possibilities'? Isn't that supposed to mean turning the 'impossible' into the 'possible'?" Naoto questioned, caught on the phrasing, and Raquel shook her head, her long hair swaying from side to side.

"'Impossible' refers to things that lack any 'possibility' from the start. What the 'Azure' enables is the countless 'possibilities' that exist in all dimensions of the world. Regardless of how slim the chances might be, it can make them a reality. If you really want to, you could even manipulate time."

For example, while today is sunny, there is a possibility that clouds could suddenly gather in the morning and it would pour rain. There was also a possibility that Naoto could fall out of bed when he woke up. Moreover, there was a chance that a neighbor might come over to borrow soy sauce, preventing him from witnessing Raquel's shower scene. All of these could be controlled freely by the 'Azure.'

"So you're saying that you can create any world you want as long as there's a possibility?"

"Yes."

"So if I have that, I wouldn't need to become a vampire... No, even in this half-baked state, I could go back to being a normal human, right?"

"Yes."

Naoto couldn't help but smile at her short affirmative answer. He felt like scolding her for surprising him. He thought he had been thrown into a hopeless situation.

He realized how simple-minded he must seem, yet he was in such a good mood that he turned to Raquel with a smile. Looking closely, he saw that her cup was empty. A kind thought surged up within him: should he offer to refill it?

"That's amazing, it's like having omniscience and omnipotence. It's like being a god. If such a thing exists, you should have said so earlier. So where can I find this 'Azure'? Let's go look for it right now!"

"...Huh?"

The cheerful exchange that had flowed so smoothly suddenly came to a halt. The grand concept of 'Azure,' which could change the world. Having known of its existence and understanding the magnitude of its power, Raquel, who had seemed so confident just moments ago, now appeared somewhat stiff. Yet she tried to maintain a calm demeanor, lifting her cup. When she touched it, she remembered it was empty. For a brief moment, her golden eyes showed a hint of distress, and she hastily set the cup back down.

Even though Naoto wasn't particularly skilled at sensing other people's emotions, he could still pick up on the subtle hints from her actions.

"...I can't believe it, but... you really don't know?"

Thinking it was a joke, Naoto peered closely at Raquel. Suddenly, he felt a sharp slap on his right cheek.

"Ow! What was that for?!"

"Shut up. You're so impertinent for a servant. You need to learn how to speak to your master."

"What do you mean 'master'? If that's the case, then why don't you give your servant some concrete instructions? What is this 'Azure'? Where is it, and how do you plan to obtain it, oh master?"

"So I'm going to investigate that now. I came to this city for that purpose!" Raquel stood up abruptly, shaking off Naoto, who was leaning over the table with both hands on it, complaining. She crossed her thin arms beneath her cloak.

Naoto looked up at her with a dissatisfied expression. "Investigate? Why this city?"

"I don't know the reason. Just..."

Raquel, who had seemed sulky and uninterested, looked off into the distance, her golden eyes losing their intensity. The crossed arms relaxed and slipped back inside her cloak.

"Just, I can feel the 'Azure' very strongly from this city."

Is 'Azure' something you can sense? Naoto looked around the living room skeptically, unsure of what Raquel was feeling. Aside from the strange visitor, it looked like the usual living room. He felt no presence of this mysterious power called 'Azure.'

However, just because he couldn't sense it didn't mean he could deny its existence. He couldn't just turn away from such a ridiculous story and return to his everyday life, pretending he didn't know anything.

A year. When the deadline Raquel mentioned arrives, what will happen to him? What kind of impact will it have on those around him? He couldn't stake Haruka's life just to confirm the validity of Raquel's claims. That was something that absolutely must not happen.

"Anyway, I understand the situation. In short, if we find this 'Azure,' everything will be resolved."

"That's about right."

"Then first, there's something I want to resolve before we even get to the 'Azure'..." As he said this, Naoto resolutely rose from his seat. He fixed a strong, determined gaze on Raquel. There was something he couldn't compromise on.

"Can you please put some clothes on?"

Having her wander around in front of him completely naked was mentally exhausting, not to mention he didn't know what misunderstandings could arise if Haruka were to stumble upon this scene.

Raquel tilted her head slightly, considering the seriousness and intensity of Naoto's voice.

"Why?"

"Why? Why are you arguing? I'm a man. Isn't it embarrassing being completely naked in front of a man?"

"That's ridiculous. Are you embarrassed to be naked in front of dogs or cats?"

"I'd still wear clothes in front of dogs and cats. Ugh, just put something on!"

Raising his voice, Naoto thrust the change of clothes that had been beside him towards Raquel. Unfortunately—or rather, as expected—there were no women's clothes in this house. So, he rummaged through the drawers and found a nearly unworn T-shirt and a fairly new pair of shorts.

He had already suggested it to Raquel before making the tea, but she had completely ignored him, simply scowling.

"You, a mere servant, dare to order me? Clearly you need some training, you useless dog."

The doorbell rang from the intercom. Ignoring the sound, Raquel furrowed her thin brows in annoyance and turned her face away with a huff.

Without hesitation, Naoto maneuvered to face her directly and grabbed the slender arm beneath her cloak.

"Stop your whining! I've been patient enough. Whether you like it or not, you're changing!"

"Who do you think you are, touching me? Let go!"

"Not a chance! Just give in..."

The chime rang again, but its faint electronic sound was drowned out by Naoto and Raquel's voices.

"Hey, don't touch me inappropriately!"

Raquel pulled hard on her arm, trying to shake off his grip, but Naoto had anticipated that. If he let go, she would likely turn and dash outside. He couldn't let a naked woman burst out of his house in broad daylight—it would be a disaster. Naoto was just as desperate.

"I'm serious... Just give in and do as I say!"

"What a barbaric man you are! You pervert!"

"I'll hear your complaints later. For now..."

"You're dead wrong if you think you can have your way with me!"

"How am I wrong...? Ugh!"

As Raquel struggled to pull away, Naoto tried to restrain her. While they were quietly grappling, Raquel lost her balance and fell onto the sofa. Naoto took advantage of the situation, falling on top of her, pinning her shoulder down and looking down at her.

I've won. He was convinced of that.

"Haha, there's no escaping now, is there, Raquel?"

"How dare a servant pin down their master... This is outrageous! Get off me right now!"

"...Hey."

"What do you mean, 'servant'? You should say that only when you look more dignified."

"This is humiliating..."

"Haha, then how about I make you experience even more humiliation?"

"Hey, Nao-kun..."



"What the heck, I'm a bit busy right now, can it wait, Haru...?"

After reflexively responding, Naoto froze at the name he had just blurted out. He felt like a rusty machine. He turned his creaking neck to the side.

At the entrance to the living room stood his childhood friend.

She was smiling.

"What are you doing, Nao-kun?"

"Uh, well, this is..."

On a weekend afternoon, in a room of an apartment where a high school boy lived alone. A girl was sprawled on the sofa, and a boy was on top of her, pinning her slender body down. The girl was not wearing any clothes. How could he explain this situation in words? How could he convey the balance of common sense and wrongdoing?

Still smiling, Haruka suddenly turned on her heel and headed toward the kitchen. She quickly returned, holding something in her hand. Naoto felt a cold sweat break out all over him at what she was holding.

"Uh, Haruka-san... what is that in your hand?"

"A sharp knife."

"Uh... knives are for cutting...?"

"That's fine too."

With a gentle smile, Haruka stopped a very, very awkward distance away. From a spot where she could objectively observe the situation in the living room, she gazed at Naoto and tilted her head as she always did, asking,

"Maybe I asked the wrong question. Hey, Nao-kun, what are you doing?" As she said this, her childhood friend's eyes, which were fixed on the silver back of the knife she was holding, were not smiling at all.

"The world is so unfair," Naoto murmured, sitting cross-legged on the living room floor, his gaze fixed downward. He was savoring the cruelty of the world.

On the other side of the low table, Raquel was sitting on the sofa.

She looked quite subdued. Wrapped in a bath towel as a makeshift cover by Haruka, she was sitting shallowly in a slightly better state than before—though it was only a slight improvement.

In front of Naoto, there was Haruka. She was sitting upright, with her back straight, her hands folded on her knees, looking at Naoto with a fixed smile that was almost too cheerful. Her temples twitched, and her gaze was cold and accusatory.

"Okay. Then please explain."

Naoto's stomach twisted at the calm, judge-like voice. Although he hadn't been asked, he felt compelled to respond and lifted his face cautiously.

Haruka's accusatory gaze pierced his chest. He wanted to protest his innocence, but the undeniable fact that he had pushed the defenseless girl down on the sofa and laughed, "Hahaha," made it all the more awkward to voice any defense.

"Um... well, her name is Raquel Alcard..." His tongue stumbled as he struggled to explain, and his gaze faltered. He wasn't feeling guilty, but it felt as though he were sitting on a bed of needles.

At that moment, Raquel moved. Until then, she had been silently sitting like a statue, but suddenly she stood up and went to Haruka's side.

"Hayami Haruka."

"Huh?"

"Hey, Raquel, stop it now..."

Naoto tried to stop her from saying anything more, but Raquel turned and faced Haruka, her voice sharp as she ordered, "Look me in the eye."

The moment the words were spoken, Haruka's body jumped slightly as if jolted.

At her words, Haruka's body jumped, her eyes widening and her mouth slightly open. She stared at Raquel as if mesmerized, unable to look away. Returning the gaze, Raquel looked straight at Haruka and began to explain calmly, "I'm Raquel Alcard. As you know, I'm Naoto Kurogane's cousin."

"What?!" Naoto exclaimed, taken aback. But Raquel ignored him and continued

"Actually, I had to come to Japan on short notice, but I couldn't arrange for a place to stay in time. So, for a while, I'll be staying at Naoto's house. But on the way here, I had an accident and lost all my belongings."

As Raquel smoothly delivered her "introduction," Naoto was left speechless. How could she come up with such a convenient lie on the spot? He was both impressed and exasperated.

Of course, Raquel was not Naoto's cousin. In fact, the real cousin was Haruka, the one Raquel was now speaking about, and Haruka knew that Naoto didn't have a cousin like Raquel.

Besides, even if she had lost her belongings in an accident, she should still have the clothes she was wearing, so there was no reason for her to be wandering around naked.

(Does she really think she can convince her with such a ridiculous story? Even Haruka is going to snap!)

The 'sharp knife' that Raquel had been clutching until a moment ago, now resting on the low table, might be swung.

Naoto cringed, waiting anxiously for what would happen next.

But then, he heard words that were almost too good to be true.

"Oh... I see. You must have had a hard time, Raquel!"

"Y-yeah!"

Naoto's voice cracked, higher than he thought it could go, as he repeated the word. His face contorted.

Haruka stood up, took Raquel's hands in hers, and, surprisingly, her eyes welled up with sympathy. Nodding repeatedly, she spoke to Raquel as if she were a younger child. "But you should have told me. You should have told me about your clothes sooner. Just wait a minute, I'll go get you something to change into right away." With a small nod of determination, Haruka quickly left Naoto's room.

It didn't feel like he waited long at all. Hurried footsteps returned almost immediately, and she burst into the living room as if it were her own home.

"Raquel, come over here. Naoto, let me borrow your room!"

"Hey, wait!"

Before he could finish, Haruka grabbed Raquel's hand and practically dragged her into Naoto's room.

Even though he knew it was pointless, Naoto couldn't help but call out, but his voice was naturally ignored, and he was left alone.

Why did she have to use his bedroom as a dressing room? She could have used the bathroom, or he could have stayed in the bedroom while Haruka and Raquel were in the living room.

Despite his many complaints, he didn't have the courage or energy to go to his room and protest to the two girls through the door.

He sighed loudly and reached for a teacup, as if to do some cleaning. As he reached for the 'very sharp knife', his hand slipped.

"Ouch..."

He had accidentally grazed his finger on the blade, cutting the tip of his little finger. The smooth feel of the blade sliding against his skin sent chills down his spine.

But what happened next made his hair stand on end.

The cut, which had been bleeding, seemed to rewind, as if in a slow-motion video, and closed up.

Unable to understand what had happened, Naoto put down the cup and touched the tip of his finger, where he had just cut himself. There was no wound. He could only feel the smooth texture of his skin. It was as if the fact that he had cut himself had been erased.

That's when he realized. It was his right hand.

Memories of the night before flooded back - the abandoned apartment building, the strange man in a suit, and the sensation of tearing off the man's extra arm.

"It can't be..." he muttered unconsciously.

He touched his arm over and over, trying to confirm its shape and feel. No matter how he touched it, his arm felt like his own. But then, on a whim, he pressed his thumb against his wrist and his body stiffened.

(No pulse...)

Normally, when I pressed my finger there, I could feel the blood pulsing with my heartbeat, but I felt nothing. Panicking, I pressed my hand to my chest. Holding my breath, I searched, and I could faintly feel my heartbeat in the palm of my hand.

I tried taking my left wrist's pulse. It was there. Perfectly normal.

(Only the right hand...)

It looked exactly like a normal arm, but somehow, this part was different from the rest of me. Even though I could feel sensations, I suddenly felt like I had a prosthetic arm. I couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't my own arm, and a vague sense of unease settled in my chest.

That's when it happened. The door opened, and it sounded so sudden, at least to Naoto.

Even though I hadn't done anything wrong, I instinctively looked up.

There, in my line of sight, was a cheerful Haruka, with Raquel being pulled along by her arm.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Naoto!"

"O-Oh..."

He shifted my gaze from Haruka's cheerful voice to Raquel behind her. Naoto flinched slightly.

Raquel, who had resisted getting dressed after being pushed onto the sofa by Naoto, was now properly clothed. She was wearing a white blouse and a black mini-skirt. A red tie at her chest was a nice accent. Was it because of her pale skin? Or was it because of her striking blonde hair? Somehow, from the bottom of my heart...

"It suits you," I thought.

Suddenly, Raquel, who had been looking down awkwardly, tilted her chin up and glared at me intensely. Confused, I tilted my head. I didn't understand why she was glaring at me.

"I'm glad we found something that suits Raquel-chan!"

It seemed that Haruka had brought a few options, as she placed another bag with more clothes next to the sofa.

It seemed that she had completely forgotten about her anger earlier. That was convenient. I decided not to say anything more and stir up trouble.

"I didn't know you had clothes like that," Naoto said admiringly, looking at Raquel.

Both the blouse and skirt had a casual design, but on Raquel, they exuded a certain elegance, almost like a dress. However, it seemed different from the clothes Haruka usually wore, reflecting different tastes.

Haruka shrugged and laughed.

"Actually, these are my mom's style."

"Yuki-san's!? Seriously?!"

"Surprising, right?"

Naoto could only nod at Haruka's words.

Yuki was a straightforward and bold person. Mini-skirts didn't seem like her style...

"Well, shall we go out then?" Haruka clapped her hands once and looked at Naoto and Raquel in turn.

"Go out? Where?" Naoto tilted his head, confused. He hadn't heard anything about going out. Haruka looked at him as if wondering why he didn't understand.

"What, you didn't hear? Raquel-chan has to go to the city hall to submit some paperwork. And Nao-kun is going along as her guarantor."

"Oh, really...?"

This was the first he'd heard of it. And what was a guarantor anyway? There were so many things he wanted to question, but he kind of understood Raquel's intention. She was probably trying to create a situation where they could be alone.

It was annoying to be manipulated by her, but it couldn't be helped. If Haruka was around, they wouldn't be able to have a proper conversation.

"Oh, yeah, that's right. I forgot." His voice might have been a little too flat, but fortunately, Haruka didn't seem to question it. Instead, she pointed to herself with concern.

"Should I come with you?"

"No, it's fine. I'll just give her a quick tour while we're at it." Since she was pretending to be a newly arrived relative, this was a good excuse.

It felt really uncomfortable lying to Haruka like this, especially since he had to keep making up stories, but there was hardly anything he could be honest about.

After tidying up the living room table, Naoto went back to his room to grab his wallet. He confirmed that Haruka wasn't following him and dragged out the tattered uniform he had hidden under the bed.

He had hidden it reflexively, thinking that he couldn't let anyone find it. He wanted to pat himself on the back for his foresight.

For now, he just needed to extract the information he wanted from Raquel, and then he'd have to get rid of this.

He felt a bit depressed thinking about having to buy a new uniform. Naoto pushed the uniform further back under the bed.

Haruka handed Naoto a memo, asking him to do some grocery shopping, and Naoto and Raquel headed out before noon.

It was a fine day with a bright sun shining down from a slightly cloudy sky. The air was pleasantly cool, and it seemed like it would be a nice day to spend outdoors.

On a weekday morning, the streets were full of people. As they walked along the bustling street, Naoto looked at Raquel...

They were walking towards their destination, taking a detour through the bustling city. Raquel, wearing Haruka's black boots, was leading the way. Despite probably not being familiar with Shinkawahama, she was walking forward without hesitation.

As he watched the golden ponytail swaying from side to side behind her, Naoto called out to the small figure in front of him.

"Hey, Raquel."

There was no answer. Her pace didn't falter.

Naoto frowned. There was no way she couldn't hear him. He had called out to her many times already.

"Raquel? Hey, Raquel!"

He called out persistently, annoyed. Finally, on about the twelfth call, the golden ponytail flipped.

"It's 'Lady' Raquel. Mind your manners, servant."

"What are you talking about..."

Naoto glared at Raquel, who was giving orders in a dissatisfied tone, just as dissatisfied. He walked beside her, sighing in exasperation. This was probably the reason for her long silence.

"I have something to ask you."

"What is it?" She finally replied. It seemed she had given up on correcting his way of speaking.

"What did you do to Haruka?" Naoto's question was accusatory.

It was about what had happened earlier. When they had bumped into each other in Naoto's living room, Haruka had believed Raquel's story. It was too easy.

Sure, Haruka wasn't the most thoughtful person. She wasn't good at doubting people, and she tended to believe people easily. But she had good intuition and wasn't stupid. She wasn't so careless that she would accept such a ridiculous story and wave her off.

Raquel shrugged nonchalantly, as if it wasn't a big deal.

"Nothing much. She just believed my story. ...Although, I don't suppose you'll believe me."

"Of course not."

"I thought so."

Her attitude, as if she already knew, was infuriating. Naoto scowled, but Raquel looked up at him with innocent eyes, as if she had done nothing wrong.

"It's a magic called 'Slave Red,' which forcibly alters perception. It manipulates the facts the target recognizes. Though, it can only be used once per person. There are no side effects or harm, so you can relax."

"I hope that's true."

Magic was a word as unbelievable as vampires. Naoto's tone was sharp with suspicion, and Raquel seemed a little puzzled as to why he was so suspicious.

"Really. Do you think there's any point in telling such a ridiculous lie?"

"You can't just expect me to believe that easily. ...Hey, so was that because of your magic?"

"What are you talking about?"

Naoto had been feeling off about this girl since she arrived, almost as much as he had about Haruka.

"You've been awfully quiet since Haruka came, haven't you? You put on those clothes without a fuss."

When Naoto had told her to get dressed, she had been quite defiant. But with Haruka, it was as if she'd done a complete 180.

Raquel hesitated for a moment. She avoided Naoto's gaze and nervously smoothed out her skirt.

"Oh, that was... just an unexpected turn of events."

"What do you mean, unexpected?"

"Haruka... I have a hard time with girls." Raquel looked down, her face flushed with embarrassment as she fumbled with her words. The haughty girl who had just looked down on Naoto and called him a servant was nowhere to be seen. In her place was a timid and bashful figure. It was as if he were looking at a completely different person. It was unfair; it felt like a fraud.

But at the same time, Naoto realized something. This wasn't just shyness or embarrassment. It was more like fear. Raquel wasn't so much stammering as she was trembling.

"Raquel... are you perhaps socially awkward?"

And to think it was limited to women. Naoto's teasing comment was cut short by a dull shock to his stomach.

"Uh... well..."

Raquel's roundhouse kick, delivered with the speed of lightning, had embedded itself in Naoto's side. When she pulled her foot back with a look of disgust, Naoto stumbled, clutching his aching side.

"What are you doing?!"

"Disciplining you."

With a huff of indignation, Raquel flicked her long hair dramatically and quickened her pace. She turned around a short distance away and gave him a contemptuous look, as if urging him to hurry up.

"You..."

She was acting as if she had him completely under her control. It was infuriating. But if he turned back and went home alone, he didn't know what Haruka would say, and he still had a mountain of questions for Raquel.

Grudgingly, he caught up and walked beside her, rubbing his bruised side.

As he glanced sideways, he noticed a large ribbon bouncing up and down in time with her steps. And on it was that number.

(One, ten, hundred... ten thousand... eight million again?)

The number he saw was '86510752'. She had a monstrous amount of vitality, as always. Or perhaps, since she was a vampire, he could say she was a monster in the truest sense of the word.

Raquel turned a corner and entered a certain street. That's when Naoto was sure of where she was headed.

This was the same road Naoto had chased her down yesterday. There was only one place she could be going to beyond this point.

An abandoned housing complex.

But... something was off.

(This road... was much worse yesterday.)

The electric poles had been snapped, the guardrails twisted and mangled. Everything seemed to have been deliberately destroyed. Yet, now, just a night later, as he walked through the same place, the damage that had been there yesterday seemed to have been completely repaired.

He could understand if they had removed scattered debris or collected discarded bicycles. But for the broken electric poles and torn-up asphalt to be restored as well, it was as if some incredibly fast construction crew had been at work.

Even if it was a road near a busy station, could they really have responded so quickly?

Despite his doubts, Naoto continued along the path with Raquel, which was gradually becoming less populated.

"What are we doing here?"

Surely, this wasn't a crime scene investigation. Naoto asked, imagining a detective from a drama.

Raquel didn't turn around, but kept her gaze fixed forward, her hair swaying behind her.

"We're going to check for remnants of Azure."

"Remnants of Azure?"

Another incomprehensible term. Naoto rubbed his temples.

"In other words, we're going to look for clues about the Azure. Just be quiet and follow me."

"Alright, alright. Then what about that monster, the Bugman?" He still hadn't learned anything about what that creature was.

Expecting to be brushed off like the 'remnants of Azure', Raquel actually made an effort to explain to Naoto.

He thought Raquel might skip over explaining just like she had with the remnants of Azure, but instead, she made a serious expression and answered as if she wanted Naoto to really listen.

"He's a follower of Spinner=Superior."

"Spinner... what is that?"

"Since it relates to you, I'll explain. Spinner=Superior is a highly regarded magician whom even the magical city of Ishana respects. He's rumored to be closer to the Azure than anyone else."

"...Ishana?"

Naoto raised his hand to his chin as if asking a teacher a question. Since she mentioned it as a city, it must be a place's name, but Naoto had never heard of it.

Raquel glanced at Naoto and then shook her head slightly.

"It's the center of magic in this world. It's where magic is managed. But that's not so important right now. What matters is the part about being 'the closest person to the 'Azure'.'"

Azure.

"The Azure is the source of power. Spinner desires it as well. However, while the Azure is known among magicians, no one actually knows what it is, where it is located, or what form it takes. There is simply too little information. Yet, despite this situation, Spinner is certainly seeking the Azure and getting closer. And now, to draw closer to it, he is targeting me."

"You? Why?"

"Because I can sense the Azure more strongly than anyone else." Saying this, Raquel placed a white hand on her chest. Naoto couldn't understand how her body sensed the Azure, but it was clear from Raquel's profile that it was not a pleasant sensation.

Unconsciously, Raquel spoke of the Azure with a hint of sadness, as if her heart ached for it.

"So... you mean he's trying to use you as a radar to find the Azure?" Naoto muttered to himself, and Raquel nodded slightly.

"That's right. That's why I was attacked by Spinner's follower yesterday. But it was actually convenient for me. I'm looking for Spinner too."

"Looking for him? Why? Aren't you being hunted?"

"I told you. There is almost no information about the Azure." Stopping her previously steady footsteps, Raquel turned to face Naoto. The trees lining the street cast long shadows, creating a dark wall. In that shadow, her golden eyes gleamed.

"It's the same for me. Even though I can sense the Azure, I don't know much about it. So I want to contact Spinner and get the information he has."

"So that means..."

It meant that both Spinner and Raquel were searching for information about the mysterious treasure called the Azure, and they were searching for each other to gain the information they lacked. Naoto frowned, struggling to understand.

"It's not like you can just find Spinner and ask him politely to exchange information, is it?"

It was clear, from yesterday's attack by the Bugman, that this wasn't a world where information could be exchanged through polite conversation. And if Spinner wasn't going to use peaceful means, it would be difficult for Raquel to approach him non-violently.

"Of course not. If he was going to tell me if I just asked, it wouldn't be so difficult."

"Then how are you going to get the information?"

"How foolish. You fight Spinner, defeat him, and extract the information." Her large eyes seemed to say, "How obvious."

For a moment, no, for a few seconds, Naoto couldn't understand what she was saying. He didn't want to understand.

A dry laugh twisted Naoto's mouth.

"Wait... what are you saying? Are you kidding me? You've got to be joking! You want me to fight the boss of those monsters from yesterday? I can't do that! I'm a high school student, you know! A completely ordinary, harmless high school student!"

Naoto pounded his chest, insisting with all his might. Although he questioned whether he was truly ordinary since he could see the opponent's life force as a number, this wasn't the time to nitpick.

"It's okay. You're already dead."

"That's not the point! I'm saying it's impossible! By the way, what kind of guy is this Spinner? He's strong, right? He's some crazy dangerous guy, isn't he?!"

"I don't know."

"Huh?!"

"I told you, I don't know. I've never met him, and apparently, very few magicians have met him directly. I don't know what he looks like, what magic he uses, or how he managed to tame that monster from yesterday."

Raquel spoke in a remarkably casual tone, tucking her hair behind her ear. That made sense for her; Spinner had long been a target for her, and the lack of information about him was a familiar situation.

But Naoto was different. He was hearing about Spinner's existence and Raquel's insistence to fight him for the first time.

His eyes widened in shock, and his hands trembled in disbelief.

"Wait... so you don't understand anything about Spinner or the Azure, do you?!"

"Shut up, I can hear you without you shouting." Raquel grimaced at Naoto's outburst, covering her ears with both hands in annoyance.

"And you came to investigate because you don't know anything, right?"

With a reproachful tone, Raquel looked up. The trees lining the street rose like walls, and beyond them was the abandoned housing complex, shrouded in a gloomy atmosphere even during the day.

Even in bright weather, entering the deserted complex changed the air entirely. It was a gritty texture filled with the smell of dust, and despite the sunlight, it felt cold. There was an unsettling vibe that brushed against his skin like something lifeless.

Raquel headed straight for the site of last night's confrontation with the Bugman. The marks of the struggle still lingered around the buildings. There were large holes left from where the Bugman had been kicked away by Raquel, as well as holes created by thrown debris.

Raquel stopped in the middle of the T-junction, crouched down, and placed her hand on the sidewalk. She closed her eyes as if listening intently.

Naoto had no idea what kind of power she was using, but according to Raquel, she was trying to trace the tracks of the insect that had escaped last night.

The insect had fled to Spinner, and she was planning to find Spinner's whereabouts by following it.

"It's fading already. I should have chased after it right away last night." After a while, Raquel said quietly and looked around.

Sitting on the curb and watching her, Naoto stood up, patted the sand off his bottom, and returned to Raquel's side.

"Then you should have chased after it yesterday."

"...Because some idiot was dying, I was busy dealing with that," she replied, a bit irritated.

"Oh... sorry for the trouble."

As if pointing out who the "idiot" was, Naoto averted his gaze.

Come to think of it, that was right. The wounds he had suffered last night had already disappeared, and he was starting to feel as if it had all been a dream. When he first woke up, he had shivered at the vividness of the sensations, but people were fickle creatures.

"So, what now? Can you not find them?"

"Don't underestimate me. I just need to make it easier to detect the traces."

Looking up at Naoto, who had peered in, Raquel answered a bit sulkily.

She then touched the ground with the hand she had been holding up and began to slide her fingers as if drawing in the sand. To Naoto's surprise, red letters started appearing on the ground, even though there was no ink or anything.

It made him shiver slightly, thinking it was blood. But more than that, Naoto was interested in the characters Raquel was drawing.

"Those... are..."

A small voice escaped Naoto's lips.

He recognized the letters Raquel was drawing. They weren't exactly the same, but they were very similar to the numbers he often saw above people's heads.

"These are ancient characters. I'm creating a magic circle to help with the magic." She seemed to have taken Naoto's murmur as a question about the unfamiliar characters. In a cool voice, as if teaching an incompetent servant, she continued to spread the strange characters around her with her white fingers.

Feeling that he shouldn't step on it, Naoto backed away as Raquel's fingers expanded the red characters. As if reacting to the sound of his footsteps, Raquel suddenly stopped writing and looked up.

"...No one lives here, do they?" she murmured.

Drawn by her voice, Naoto looked around at the eerily quiet housing complex.

"I heard there was an accident in this housing complex a long time ago. That's why no one lives here anymore, and it's been abandoned."

"An accident...?"

"I wasn't around when this place was first built, so I don't know all the details," Naoto said, scratching his cheek as a preface.

While Naoto was talking, Raquel had returned her gaze to the ground and resumed drawing characters.

Although she didn't ask him to continue, he assumed she was listening since he had brought it up. Looking out at the desolate housing complex, Naoto recounted the story he had heard.

Before this housing complex was built, there had been a small hospital on a hill in front of it. Now, only the iron towers supporting the power lines remained, but back then, it had been a hospital large enough to accommodate inpatients.

However, an incident occurred just before the housing complex was completed. An unknown pathogen had leaked from the hospital, contaminating the entire area around the housing complex and dissolving every human being within the premises.

"Humans... dissolved?" Raquel asked.

Naoto nodded. "It was like their clothes were left behind, but the people inside them had completely disappeared. Since there were no bodies left, the only explanation was that they had 'dissolved.' At least, that's what was announced after a thorough investigation. It sounds crazy, I know. Anyway, that's why this housing complex was never sold and has been abandoned ever since."

He wasn't entirely sure about the truth of the story. Even now, it was often talked about in whispers, with people speculating about ghosts, government conspiracies, and even aliens.

"I see..." Raquel murmured sadly.

Surprised by her unexpected reaction, Naoto turned to look at her. But Raquel was still expressionless, just as she had been a moment ago, and was busy moving her hands.

(Was I imagining things?)

Although he had a nagging feeling, he hesitated to ask further because of the sadness in her voice. Before Naoto could ask anything, Raquel finished drawing the pattern and stood up. She walked to the center of the completed magic circle.

"I'm going to search for traces of Spinner's insect now. It will take a while, so please don't disturb me."

With that, Raquel spread her arms, closed her eyes, and began to concentrate.

A breeze blew in from nowhere, gently lifting Raquel into the air. As soon as her toes left the ground, the red characters she had drawn began to glow faintly as if waiting for this moment.

(Wow, that's amazing, it's like magic... no, it is magic)

Even though he knew it was magic, Naoto was awestruck.

It was a phenomenon beyond reason, different from tricks or stage illusions.

Raquel remained floating in the air, her senses heightened, without moving. Her long, golden hair, tied in a ponytail, swayed gently as if floating underwater. Even though she had told him not to disturb her, he felt he couldn't. She seemed as fragile as a delicate glass figurine that would shatter if he interfered in any way.

Naoto backed away, careful not to make a sound.

He decided to stay a little distance away. With that in mind, he headed towards the nearest building.

There were two large holes in the building. One was where the monster man had been blown away and the building had collapsed. The other was where Naoto had been buried when he regained consciousness, having lost his arm.

His memory of that time was hazy, but as he got closer, Naoto recalled how he had nearly died there.

But there was something strange about this place. At first, it had been a vague unease. But now, as he looked down at the spot, he realized what it was.

Naoto had been mauled by the insect, probably injured in other places as well, and had been buried under the rubble in a near-death state. If a human is injured, they bleed. Especially after losing an arm, the bleeding would have significantly increased the risk of death.

Yet, there was not a single drop of blood here.

(It can't be a dream... if it was a dream, this place wouldn't be so damaged)

Naoto recalled the incident that had led to the abandonment of the housing complex. The buildings and clothes had remained, but the humans had vanished. It was very similar to this situation. There were traces of a struggle, but no signs of human injury. It wasn't just Naoto's blood that was missing. Naoto looked over his shoulder.

The corpse was gone. The monster man's corpse, which had been lying near the trees, was nowhere to be found. And... his right arm, which had been torn off by the monster, was also missing.

Had someone taken it away? But who, and why?

If the police had been called by a neighbor, the complex would have been sealed off as a crime scene. Naoto and Raquel wouldn't have been able to enter so easily.

(Did Spinner do it? But there's no reason for him to do something like that.)

If he needed the body for some reason, he could just take it. There was no need to carefully remove Naoto's blood and right arm. He also noticed that the path he had taken to get here had been completely repaired.

Naoto reached out and touched the pile of rubble. The concrete was cold, and the deeper parts were slightly damp.

(Damp?)

It didn't feel like the dampness of blood. Curious, he leaned in and sniffed. If it were blood, there would be a corresponding smell. But all Naoto could smell was a chemical smell, like a detergent.

"Naoto."

Startled, Naoto jumped at the sudden voice.

Apparently, Raquel had finished her investigation. She was walking towards him, her borrowed shoes firmly planted on the ground. There was nothing left behind her. The magic circle drawn with the red characters had either disappeared along with the light or left no trace.

"I've got a general idea of the direction. I want to go around the town a bit. Guide me."

"Guide you, huh? Can't you just say 'please'? ... Hey, what's wrong with you?" Replying to Raquel's typically arrogant attitude with a complaint, Naoto suddenly glanced at her face. He thought it might just be his imagination, but her expression seemed clouded.

"Are you feeling okay? You look a bit pale."

Her skin was already pale, but her cheeks seemed unusually pale. Although, considering she was a vampire, maybe being pale was normal for her.

Raquel looked up at Naoto and shook her head.

"I'm fine. Now hurry up and guide me."

"Well, if you say so."

When Raquel started walking away quickly, Naoto had no choice but to follow. Convincing himself that that was just how vampires were, Naoto jogged to catch up with the girl.

Looking up at the sky, he saw that the sun was quite high. Had the temperature risen a bit?

Before leaving, Naoto glanced back at the abandoned housing complex. It was a place that had been abandoned due to a strange incident. That was how he had always perceived it.

But after talking to Raquel, he had started to wonder. A pathogen that could stay confined to the complex, instantly melt the humans there, and leave no trace outside? Could such a pathogen even exist?

(Well, it was a long time ago)

There was no point in pondering it now.

Shaking off the trivial question like a thread, Naoto left the orderly ruins with Raquel. The trail of Azure seemed to lead toward the downtown area, which was also the center of the city.

For directions, Naoto had chosen a route that went down the road in front of the abandoned housing complex, even though it wasn't a path he usually took. It should be a bit quicker to get to downtown than going back the way they came.

However, very few people walked this road because they had to pass in front of the abandoned housing complex.

As they walked down the gentle slope, with no one else in sight, Naoto looked at Raquel next to him. For some time now, she had been tugging at her skirt and blouse, furrowing her brow in apparent discomfort.

"Do your clothes not fit?"

It looked fine to him, but when Naoto asked, Raquel's dissatisfaction deepened. She glared at him.

"I've never worn clothes before. It's uncomfortable and tight. Especially this underwear... it clings and itches so much..." As she spoke, Raquel tried to lift the hem of her skirt.

"Whoa, whoa, wait, stop! Don't do that!"

"I want to take it off."

"Absolutely not! Please, stop!" With Raquel looking at him earnestly, Naoto desperately tried to hold her back.

Raquel pouted, clearly dissatisfied, but he didn't care about that. Sure, there were no people around at this moment. But it wasn't a guarantee that no one would come by. If she took it off and someone passed by, the only scene they would see would be a high school boy forcing a high school girl to take off her underwear.

And what was she going to do with the underwear after she took it off? Carry it around? Who would? Raquel's skirt only had a decorative pocket and no bag. And he only had a bag for his wallet and phone. There was only one possible answer.

There was no way he would allow that to happen.

"Anyway, you said this is the first time you've worn clothes. So what have you been wearing until now?" As he urged her to move on, his genuine curiosity slipped out.

Raquel swayed her golden hair and replied with a puzzled expression.

"What a foolish question. I said this is the first time I've worn clothes, so of course, I've never worn any since I was born."

"That doesn't make sense! Wait, how old are you, anyway?" He realized he had forgotten to ask since she looked about his age, but now he remembered he didn't know anything about her other than her name and that she was a vampire.

Given that she was a vampire, maybe she was two hundred years old or something outrageous. Naoto's expectations were turned completely upside down.

"My 'self' came into existence two years ago, and I came out of the coffin four days ago. So, if you want to say it in human terms, I'm two years and four days old." I stopped walking involuntarily.

"Two... years?"

That was much shorter than he had expected. More importantly, did vampires grow to a high school level in just two years?

Raquel, who had stopped a few steps ahead, urged him to hurry with her gaze. There was a smirk of disdain in her eyes.

"Don't worry. I have at least five hundred million times more knowledge than you do."

"Five hundred million times, huh..."

Is she like an elementary school kid? Naoto thought, stifling a laugh as he stepped forward to walk beside Raquel again.

As Naoto walked, he was mindful of the surroundings. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Raquel making a sour face. He couldn't allow Raquel to go fully naked, but it seemed she still needed quite a bit of time to get used to wearing clothes.

Suddenly, Raquel came to an abrupt stop.

"Hm? What's wrong...?" Naoto had taken a few steps forward, so he turned around to see what was wrong. Immediately, he rushed forward and reached out with both arms.

As if letting out a breath, Raquel collapsed, limp and lifeless.

"Hey! What now? What's wrong?!"

Was she so stressed by the clothes that she was about to collapse? The joke was right at the tip of his tongue, but he quickly swallowed it back. Raquel's body was abnormally hot, like someone with a high fever.

"Don't touch me so casually, you servant..."

Regaining consciousness, Raquel glared at Naoto with her eyes half-open. But her hands, which she tried to use to push Naoto away, had no strength at all. Her golden eyes, half-lidded

and glazed with fever, were fixed on Naoto's neck, breathing heavily through her parted lips. The dazed look in her eyes burned hotter than her fevered body.

But soon, with a weak shake of her head, she mustered what little strength she had left to pull away from him.

"Don't touch me."

"Listen, this isn't the time to be stubborn." Frustrated by Raquel's obvious attempt to suppress her poor health, Naoto raised his voice. Raquel struggled to her feet and took a deep breath.

"I just need... to rest a bit." As soon as she said that, she stepped toward Naoto with a pained look on her face, lowering her eyelids.

Her foot sank into Naoto's shadow.

"W-what the-?" Naoto stretched his neck out and stared at his feet in disbelief. He thought he was imagining things. But it was no mistake; Raquel's foot was indeed sinking into his shadow, as if stepping into water or a swamp.

With each step she took, Raquel's body entered Naoto's shadow as if descending a staircase, and after a few seconds, she had completely disappeared.

"Ra... Raquel?"

He couldn't even count how many times he had experienced this sensation since yesterday. Yet, Naoto could only stare at his own shadow, unable to look away from what he had just witnessed.

He tried stepping on his own shadow. His foot didn't sink in, and as expected, he felt the hard ground beneath him. But... "What is it?"

Raquel's voice echoed in his head, as if she were climbing out of the shadow. Her figure was nowhere to be seen.

The voice and arrogant tone were unmistakably hers.

"Well, I mean, just now, in the shadow..."

"I just borrowed it as a resting place because I've been in the sun a little too long. Nothing will happen to your body, so don't panic so foolishly."

Despite her weakness, her arrogant and haughty attitude remained intact. While that was reassuring, something else caught Naoto's attention.

"Sunlight... right, it's because you're a vampire."

He had heard that vampires turn to ash when exposed to sunlight.

When Naoto said this, a sense of irritation came from the shadow.

"Could you not lump me together with those inferior vampires? For someone of my high standing, sunlight and holy water are not much of a problem."

"But you just collapsed!"

"That was because I used a large spell earlier and got drained. While there might be some impact, sunlight is nothing to worry about."

Naoto couldn't help but smile wryly at her use of "nothing to worry about." Regardless of her words, it didn't change the fact that she was putting on a brave front. It wasn't as if she would immediately turn to ash, but still, she was trying to endure to the point of nearly losing consciousness—what a stubborn lady she was.

"Whatever. So, what now?" Crouching down, Naoto addressed the shadow at his feet.

It felt strange. Talking to a shadow that stretched out like a stain on the sidewalk was something he didn't want anyone to see.

From the shadow, Raquel's voice returned, her breath coming in deep gasps.

"Let's head towards the center of town for now."

"Alright, alright, got it."

He might as well serve her faithfully while she was weak. With that thought, Naoto started walking down the path, dragging the shadow behind him.

They descended the gentle slope and emerged into the bustling downtown area.

If they continued straight down the wide road, they would eventually reach Shinkawahama Station. But Naoto turned into a side street a few blocks before that and stopped at a small park behind a game center.

The park didn't have any playground equipment, just two benches against a concrete wall. It was located in a rather unsafe area and wasn't a popular spot, thankfully.

Just as he had hoped. Naoto sat on a bench and, after making sure no one was watching, spoke to the shadow at his feet.

"Raquel, we've reached downtown."

To be precise, it wasn't the center of downtown, but it was daytime, after all. It would be difficult to find a secluded spot in the heart of downtown.

He didn't intend to play the role of a mysterious man talking to a shadow. However, even though he had found a place where the girl could emerge from the shadow without causing a scene, there was no reaction from Raquel.

"Hey, Raquel? Can you hear me?" Naoto raised his voice slightly and peered into the shadow. He couldn't see inside the shadow, but by concentrating, he could sense that Raquel was there.

But she was too quiet. A bad thought crossed his mind. But then Naoto heard something.

A steady, gentle breathing sound. That was... snoring.

"Are you asleep?!" He blurted out the question before he could stop himself and then quickly looked around. Good, no one was there.

"What am I going to do now..." Naoto ran his hands through his hair.

If Raquel didn't wake up, he couldn't continue his investigation. He had no idea about this "Azure" thing.

(I could go home... no, that won't work. Haruka is there.)

If she asked where Raquel was, he'd be in trouble. He couldn't just say she was in a shadow.

So, there was only one thing to do. Naoto got up and bought a can of coffee from the vending machine nearby.

With a heavy clunk, the can rolled out. He picked it up and returned to the bench.

It was a beautiful day, and luckily, Naoto seemed to be fine in the sunlight.

He decided to relax here for a while and wait for Raquel to wake up.

(I don't have anything else to do. ... And I have some things to think about)

His thoughts drifted as he spoke to himself. Naoto opened the can and took a sip of the cold coffee. It was sweet, slightly bitter, and the unique sensation cooled him down a bit.

"A vampire... huh?"

Taking advantage of the fact that no one was around, he muttered to himself.

It had all started with a strange incident the previous evening. Two abnormal readings he had seen while walking home. That was what had dragged him away from his peaceful life.

It felt like more than twenty-four hours had passed since then. Everything had happened so quickly.

His encounter with the insect-like creature, meeting Raquel, the bizarre battlefield with flying debris, the man's body transformed into a black mass, his lost right arm, and his life force dropping to '0'.

(So, I... died, didn't I?)

Something must have happened during the gap in his memory that he couldn't recall, and then he died.

Today was supposed to be the end. But thanks to her, he was still alive.

Raquel had saved him.

"Need a hand?"

He remembered the girl's voice asking him that.

(She saved me again...)

She had already protected him countless times from the monster man, who had been throwing rubble around. Now, she had saved him from death. Thanks to her, his life force was at "0," Raquel seemed determined to move into Naoto's house, and on top of that, she was making unreasonable demands like getting his hands on the Azure and fighting an ultra-powerful magician.

Still, Raquel had saved him. She had given Naoto today. And thanks to Raquel, he hadn't made Haruka cry. That was an undeniable fact.

Naoto looked down at the shadow as he sipped from a cold can.

Raquel Alcard, the vampire who had been alive for two years and four days.

She had appeared in a striking outfit of nothing but a cloak, could kick through concrete walls with inhuman strength, and was, in every sense of the word, a bizarre girl.

But just earlier, when she had nearly lost her strength and was about to collapse, her shoulder had felt delicate. Her disdain for the first clothes she wore was childlike, and when she had been nervous around Haruka and couldn't say a word, she truly resembled a borrowed cat.

(She probably doesn't know much about the things I and Haruka take for granted)

Things like chatting with friends, the annoyance of alarm clocks that interrupt sleep, and of course, the taste of canned coffee like the one in Naoto's hand, or even how to open one.

Although, she claimed to have five hundred million times more knowledge than Naoto.

"...Oh, I forgot."

Shifting his gaze from the shadow to the can of coffee, Naoto muttered something else. He had completely forgotten to ask Raquel about his right arm.

He needed to ask this young vampire girl why his arm had been restored when he woke up, whether his arm had actually been lost in the first place, and how his injuries had healed.

(Well, I can't do that until she wakes up)

He couldn't do anything about it.

The thoughts that were supposed to continue suddenly burst white and disappeared.

He thought he saw something moving at the corner of his eye. And then, almost simultaneously, or perhaps it was at the same time, Naoto's body was thrown sideways with tremendous force and slammed into something.

Bang!

The air inside his body seemed to burst. He felt like a popped balloon. For a moment, he felt completely weightless, and then a second later, his body felt a hundred times heavier.

His vision, which had turned white, gradually returned.

He was in the simple park next to the parking lot. It was a familiar sight. And in the middle of it, Naoto was... embedded in the vending machine he had just bought the can of coffee from, as if he had been rammed by a thick stake.

"Ugh... ugh..."

His trembling jaw tried to take in a breath but failed, and he choked. He couldn't even swallow properly.

He couldn't. The breath that had gotten caught in his throat, unable to find its way out, was replaced by a thick, slimy mass that welled up from the back of his throat and spilled out of his mouth.

Only after he had vomited did he realize it was a liquid. It was an unpleasantly dark red in his blurred vision, and the nauseating smell told him it was a large amount of blood mixed with other bodily fluids. The faint taste of sweet coffee made it even more disgusting.

"Ugh... ugh..."

A hoarse, wheezing sound trembled out.

Still dripping blood from his mouth, Naoto looked at what had slammed him into the vending machine.

It was an arm. A thick, sturdy human arm, like a log. It had pierced his abdomen halfway, literally nailing his body to the vending machine like a stake.

The arm slid out of Naoto's abdomen, leaving a wet trail. But then another arm grabbed his chest and pulled him away from the vending machine.

His clothes were pulled up, exposing his body. But he couldn't shake off the arm. His throat was clogged with blood, and his mouth was a gaping hole.

His whole body felt like it had been shattered into pieces.

Dragging his weak limbs, Naoto was pulled forcefully.

Naoto's eyes caught sight of the gray concrete wall. He understood the arm's intention. The thick concrete wall would be even harder than the vending machine.

(That's... a bad idea...)

A slow sense of crisis whispered in the corner of Naoto's mind. But there was no way that protest would reach the arm's owner. With a flick of the wrist, as if discarding a doll, Naoto's body was thrown towards the wall. His limbs flailed as he experienced a brief sensation of floating.

And then, a shock, like a slash, struck Naoto's torso, as if the blow he had received to his abdomen was insignificant in comparison. Something shattered. As he heard the sound, Naoto crashed into the gray wall and lost consciousness before he could feel the coldness of the concrete.

There was nothing but darkness. He thought he was dead. After all, Raquel had just saved him. Thinking that... unconsciously, he lifted his eyelids.

His vision returned faster than his consciousness. With a single blink, his vision stabilized, and ragged breaths shook his body violently.

His heart, which he thought had stopped, was pounding loudly. Leaning against the wall, Naoto sat down with his legs outstretched. His right side of vision was red. Even though he could breathe, his whole body was heavy and he couldn't move properly.

The pain he should have felt seemed to have been blown away somewhere far away, and instead, his index finger joint ached unnecessarily.

Suddenly, his vision narrowed. He saw a shoe sole. He was about to be crushed. At that moment, Naoto desperately twisted his neck.

A sharp crack, like something hard breaking, echoed right beside his ear. Naoto could feel the blood rushing through his body. He moved only his eyes to look sideways. Where his head had been just a moment ago, there was a foot in a worn-out leather shoe, embedded in the wall.

A shiver ran down Naoto's spine. If he had reacted any slower, his head would have been crushed under that shoe like a ripe tomato.

"Wh-what the... hell are you..."

With his shoulders heaving from his ragged breathing, Naoto followed the foot embedded in the wall to find its owner.

The attacker was a tall, powerfully built man. He looked to be in his early twenties. He wasn't Japanese. His chest was so thick and his shoulders so broad that his shirt looked too tight. His arms were thick and muscular, and his legs were like spears. He had thick eyebrows, sharp eyes, and a deeply carved, fierce expression. Perhaps it was also due to his messy, unkempt hair, which was simply thrown back. He looked like a wild carnivore.

The number above his head read '2394211'. This man, though not to the extent of Raquel, had a number far beyond that of a normal human.

"...Dodged it, huh?"

The man growled, muttering resentfully. His voice wasn't as rough and harsh as his appearance, but it carried a heavy sense of menace and murderous intent.

Naoto looked up at the beast-like man without taking his eyes off him. He didn't know him. And he had no idea why such a dangerous-looking man would attack him.

Returning his hostility, he retorted.

"What the hell are you doing, you... trying to kill me?!"

"I've already killed you twice. Why won't you die?" The heavy voice replied immediately, making Naoto start.

It was only natural. Naoto had been slammed into a vending machine with tremendous force, and then into a concrete wall. He had vomited a lot of blood. He thought he had broken bones all over his body...

Yet, even though he had been barely able to breathe just a moment ago, he was now shouting angrily.

Naoto moved his neck, which was still stiff, and looked down at himself.

(As I thought...)

The wound where the man's arm had been embedded in his abdomen was gone.

"So you're an 'immortal' too?"

"What...?"

Before Naoto could finish his sentence, the strong man pulled his foot out of the broken wall and swung it down again to crush Naoto's head.

"Ahh...!"

Naoto bent his body to avoid the direct hit. But instead of his head, his right shoulder was crushed under the man's shoe. The force that had shattered the concrete now shattered Naoto's shoulder.

"Ugh, aaaah!"

It hurt so bad. A muffled scream tore at Naoto's throat as he crouched, clutching his shoulder.

The man clicked his tongue and swung his other leg. The leg, which was as flexible as a whip, sliced through the air and aimed for Naoto's head again.

Naoto managed to raise his head, but that was all. There was no way he could dodge it. He could already imagine the sensation of that toe cracking his skull.

But the man's foot didn't crush Naoto's head.

He was alive. He still had eyes, a mouth, and a head. Naoto couldn't comprehend what was happening as he looked at the strange thing in front of him.

It was another arm. But this time, it wasn't the strong man's arm; it was more like a woman's arm with white, smooth skin. The reason I say 'like' is because it was clearly not a human arm.

The arm had grown out of the concrete wall, behind Naoto. It had a shoulder, an elbow, and a wrist, and it was abnormally long, resembling a mannequin's arm. There were six of them in total, three on each side, crossing each other to form a shield that protected Naoto. One pair had been shattered, but the others had taken the brunt of the man's powerful kick.

"...Stop it, Valkenhayn."

Another man's voice came from the opposite side of the arms. It was a young man's voice, firm but calm.

The strong man, called Valkenhayn, turned his head slightly, looking at the voice.

Waiting for him, the arms that had been shielding Naoto disappeared silently back into the wall. The view that had been blocked by the three pairs of arms opened up, and finally, Naoto could see the other man.

He didn't know when he had arrived, but a strange man was standing in the parking lot behind the game center.

The man named Valkenhayn had a rough-looking face, but he was dressed in a shirt, pants, and leather shoes, looking like a dangerous foreigner at most. However, the appearance of the second man was extremely peculiar.

His hair was golden and neatly cut, and his physique was quite average. But his eyes were completely covered by a black leather band, and he was wearing a purple cloak over a suit-like outfit.

From the color of his skin, he was probably Caucasian, but because he couldn't see his eyes, it was unclear what kind of person he was.

Although his appearance was ordinary enough to blend into the surroundings, compared to Valkenhayn, who had tried to kill someone without a word of greeting, this man seemed more rational and reasonable, despite his unusual appearance.

"Why are you interfering, Relius?"

Calling the man with the covered eyes Relius, Valkenhayn spoke again, his voice low and filled with aggression.



The man named Relius approached Naoto with a leisurely gait, completely unfazed by Valkenhayn's aggressive stance.

"That's a 'human'. Not an 'immortal'."

Even with his eyes covered, Relius's vision seemed unimpaired. There was no hesitation or uncertainty in his steps. As he approached, Naoto pushed himself up against the wall. He leaned against the wall for support as he stood up. Although Relius had protected him from Valkenhayn's attack, Naoto couldn't be sure he was an ally. He kept a watchful eye on both men, ready for anything.

Seeing this, Valkenhayn furrowed his brow.

"How is that a 'human'? Humans die when you kill them."

"Not necessarily. ... Anyway, back off. That's not your target." Relius's voice was flat and devoid of emotion, ignoring Valkenhayn's rage. Continuing his steady pace, he walked beside Valkenhayn and turned his face away as if to urge him again to back off.

"...Tch." After glaring at each other for a while, Valkenhayn clicked his tongue and suddenly lifted his foot. Without hesitation, he swung it down at Naoto's leg.

"Guaaaaah!" With a sound like a popped water balloon, Naoto's right leg was crushed. The intense pain made Naoto collapse, clutching his right ankle. Below the ankle was a mangled mess of flesh, blood, and broken bones.

"Ugh, ah, uhh..."

Turning his back on the groaning Naoto, Valkenhayn walked away, looking annoyed. Relius, on the other hand, remained where he was, staring intently at Naoto who was rubbing his face against the ground. Noticing his gaze, Naoto followed his line of sight - or rather, tried to guess the direction of his gaze since his eyes were covered - and looked at what remained of his shattered leg.

It was a gruesome sight. The result of a merciless act, it was a grotesque scene that made him want to cry.

But as the scattered flesh and bones crumbled and dissipated like burnt ash, his tears dried up.

The scattered flesh and bones turned into a red mist and disappeared, and in an instant, Naoto's foot was restored to its original form.

How could that be human? Naoto was stunned to see it.

It was Relius's voice, heard nearby, that brought Naoto back to reality.

"Hmm... Interesting... 'Regeneration'?"

Startled by the close voice, Naoto flinched.

Relius bent over and watched Naoto's regeneration intently. When Naoto moved away, he straightened up, looking somewhat surprised. It was as if he were asking what was wrong.

"You really went all out, didn't you... I guess I'll have to listen to 'Kihiro's' complaints again..." Glancing around casually, Relius muttered blandly as he looked at the vending machine and wall that had been irreparably destroyed. "Are you alright?"

Naoto frowned, hesitant to respond to the action and words. Just a moment ago, a man had tried to crush his foot, and now this man, who seemed to be his companion, was offering him a hand and showing concern. He didn't know the situation, but he wished they would either be enemies or allies, not both. It was stressful to second-guess their intentions.

Thinking this, he pushed away the outstretched hand and stood up on his own.

"I'm not okay! It hurts like hell!"

"So your sense of pain is still functioning."

"Of course it is! What do you think I am, anyway?!" As Naoto shouted out his frustration, he glared at Relius, who seemed impressed as he rested his chin on his hand. It was hard to tell his age since his face was obscured, but from his voice and demeanor, Naoto guessed he was only a few years older. He was probably younger than Valkenhayn from earlier.

Naoto's gaze shifted to the number floating above Relius's head. He was surprised by what he found. '9152.' He had expected this man to have an abnormal number like the other guy, but it was just a normal human number—slightly lower than Naoto's average, in fact.

At that moment, a chill ran down his spine. He didn't know why. Perhaps it was because Relius had suddenly flashed a grin at him.

"My companion has caused you trouble. As an apology, let me share a few things." Relius said with a faint smile. He was a man with a voice that showed little emotion. But now, like his smile, there was a hint of joy in his voice. "If something like this happens again, the first thing you should do is protect your head. If your head gets crushed, no matter how immortal you are, you won't be able to regenerate right away. During that time, we can finish you off."

Naoto instinctively touched his head, as if drawn in by the calm tone of Relius's words. Come to think of it, Valkenhayn had tried to crush his head. So that's why he had done that. But doubts arose. Valkenhayn's initial attack had been aimed at his stomach, right?

"...Then why didn't he target my head from the start?"

"Immortals are always prepared for attacks on the head. So, first, we immobilize them, and then we destroy their head... that's the standard procedure." As he said this, Relius took a few steps

back. Naoto realized he was avoiding the shadows as Relius lowered his chin and directed his gaze at the ground.

"We are targeting vampires. Our goal is not to torment a sturdier boy with regenerative abilities. And of course, we didn't come to chase down a newborn girl either."

Naoto tensed up and glared at Relius with sharper eyes. He quickly realized what Relius was talking about. This man knew about Raquel.

Relius must have seen through Naoto's wariness. He briefly lifted his chin as if to steal a glance at Naoto's expression, then turned to address the shadows.

"She's doing well, but she's still inexperienced... You should at least be better at hiding your presence. Otherwise, he'll get the wrong idea again..."

Naoto couldn't remain silent after that. The shadows at his feet rippled like the surface of water, and from them, Raquel appeared without a sound. Just as she had sunk into the shadows before, she gradually emerged as if climbing a staircase, eventually standing in front of Naoto.

Her large, slanted golden eyes stared at Relius defiantly.

"I appreciate the advice, Relius Clover." Hearing this, Relius's smile deepened.

"Hoh... So you have some information about me. Wonderful." His voice was filled with satisfaction. As he continued to gaze at Naoto and Raquel, Relius took a few steps back, placing a hand on his chest and bowing his head slightly.

"I must go after my companion. Until we meet again." With those words, Relius swirled his striking purple cloak and vanished in the direction Valkenhayn had gone.

With the strange duo gone, the tension in the air immediately dissipated.

Naoto's body felt heavy, as if a weight had been lifted from him. He leaned against the concrete wall behind him. Soon, his knees gave out, and he slid down to sit. Concrete debris from the wall lay scattered around him, making the position uncomfortable at best. But he was too exhausted to get up and move.

"Hah... hah... I thought I was going to die..." He forced out a dry laugh, feeling no joy whatsoever. He truly believed he was going to die, and he thought he was dead. More than that, he was in excruciating pain. The fact that he had to endure such experiences filled him with deep frustration.

Overwhelmed by emotions he couldn't quite identify, whether it was anger or fear, Naoto looked up to find Raquel standing in front of him. When he looked up, her large golden eyes were staring down at him intently.

"You're such a mess. You're just like a rag doll."

"Shut up. And what's with those guys anyway... You know them, don't you?" Glaring at her in response to her calm voice, Naoto twisted his mouth in annoyance. He wanted her to show some concern.

Naoto thought he should at least show some concern, but there were no injuries that warranted it. Raquel raised her head and glanced in the direction where the duo had fled. She spoke in a somewhat stern tone, "The man who attacked you first was Valkenhayn Helsing. The one in the cloak is Relius Clover, an 'Immortal Breaker,' a specialist in eliminating immortals."

"Immortal Breaker." Naoto frowned as he looked up at Raquel's profile. It had a rather ominous ring to it. Being close to Raquel, a vampire girl who was considered an immortal, made it sound not only dangerous but also extremely unsettling.

Suddenly, he heard the distant wail of a siren growing louder. Someone must have called the police. It wasn't surprising, given the circumstances. It was the middle of the day, and even in a relatively quiet area, it was far from deserted. A game center was just a stone's throw away, and it was open for business despite its old-fashioned appearance. It was inevitable that someone would report seeing a high school boy being thrown into a vending machine or a concrete wall.

"Ugh... I wish this was all over. I just want my normal life back..." Naoto ran his hands through his hair in frustration. He looked up at Raquel with tired eyes. "Hey, listen..."

He was about to suggest that they should leave and continue their search another time, but he hesitated. When he glanced at Raquel, he noticed her complexion was worse than before. Her energy level, represented by the number above her head, had dropped significantly. It was now '86501107', a decrease of several thousand from the last time he had checked. For a human, such a drop would be fatal.

(How long has she been like this?) he wondered. The fact that her energy had depleted so much while she was resting in the shadows meant that she was either consuming energy at an alarming rate or something had drained her. Perhaps it was the encounter with Valkenhayn and Relius.

Either way, it wasn't wise to keep Raquel on her feet any longer, especially in broad daylight.

"Raquel, let's go home today," Naoto said seriously, his tone more assertive than a suggestion. "Neither of us is in top condition. If we encounter Spinner while we're like this, we won't be able to do anything but lose."

Naoto didn't know the full extent of Spinner's powers, but he knew the sorcerer was far beyond ordinary humans. This was different from picking a fight with a random delinquent.

"But in ten hours, the Azure Remnant will disappear completely. We won't be able to track it anymore," Raquel replied, hesitant and conflicted, her eyes scanning the area as if she could still sense the remnant nearby.

Naoto shook his head. "We'll find it another time. Our priority right now is your health."

"They're looking for you too, right? So they'll probably attack again soon, and there will be plenty of opportunities. It'd be pointless if we get caught and killed. They're not the type to settle things peacefully, are they?"

Just like Relius had said, even immortals like vampires could be killed. Naoto fully agreed. Raquel had a life force indicator too, and if it was depleted, she would die.

"Besides, we'll stick out like a sore thumb walking around looking like this. If anyone sees us, it'll be a pain to explain, and we'll have to change our clothes."

Naoto spread his arms, revealing his tattered clothing. Even though his wounds had healed, his T-shirt and jeans were still torn. His collar was ripped wide open, and there were dried bloodstains on his chest.

Raquel nodded slowly, deep in thought. She seemed to understand the gravity of their situation. "I suppose you're right," she said, sighing. "But wait a moment."

She moved away from Naoto and stood in front of a wall, avoiding the large crack created by Valkenhayn. She ran her fingers along the gray wall, tracing something. It was the same red writing he had seen in the abandoned building, but this time, it was arranged in horizontal lines, more like a note than a magic circle.

After writing a few lines, she turned around. "Alright, let's go."

Naoto followed her, his eyes drawn to the red writing that was slowly fading into the gray wall. They carefully made their way back to his apartment, avoiding people and hiding in the shadows whenever necessary. Somehow, he managed to reach his apartment without anyone noticing the bloodstain on his shirt.

After checking that the coast was clear, he called out to Raquel, who emerged cautiously from the shadows. He had warned her beforehand that if Haruka saw her, she would probably ask a lot of questions, and he might even get scolded. It seemed like his warning had worked.

For now, Haruka was nowhere to be seen. Both Naoto and Raquel breathed a sigh of relief.

"Now... the real problem begins."

As Naoto pulled his house keys out of his pocket, he lowered his voice. They couldn't let their guard down yet. There was a good chance that Haruka was inside. In fact, knowing her, it was more likely than not. She probably made lunch and was waiting for Naoto and Raquel to return. If he went in wearing a blood-stained T-shirt, Haruka would be terrified. She would undoubtedly assume he was seriously injured.

"Alright, Raquel. Here's the plan. You go in first and distract Haruka. While you do that, I'll slip in, change, and then join you."

"I've told you before, I'm not good with other girls." Raquel replied, averting her gaze. It was clear that she wasn't enthusiastic about the idea.

But Naoto needed her cooperation. "It'll be fine. If she sees you like this, she might panic."

With a hint of annoyance, and then resignation, Raquel turned towards the door. Naoto quickly unlocked the door and urged her inside. As soon as Raquel slipped through, he closed the door behind her.

(She's so reluctant) he thought to himself. Despite her aloof and arrogant demeanor, she seemed so timid about the idea of being alone with Haruka for even a short while. *(I hope she's okay.)*

He pressed his ear against the door, trying to listen for any sounds from inside. But he couldn't hear anything. Normally, he would be able to hear Haruka greet Raquel. But there was nothing.

(What's going on?)

Even if Raquel was quiet, Haruka would surely say something when she saw her. There was no way she would ignore Raquel's arrival. But the house was eerily silent. Confused, Naoto moved to the gap between the door and the wall and pressed his ear closer. Still, there was no sound.

"Raquel! Haruka!"

Something was wrong. Naoto felt it instinctively and immediately burst into the apartment. Kicking off his shoes, he rushed down the hallway. At the end of the corridor, he saw Raquel standing still, as if frozen.

"Raquel, what's wrong?!"

Something felt off about the atmosphere in the apartment, and a sense of dread washed over him. As he hurried into the living room, his gaze was drawn to Raquel, who was standing stiffly at the entrance. He tried to move her, but she was as rigid as a statue. It was as if she was sewn into place.

On the sofa in Naoto's living room sat a stranger. As Naoto's footsteps drew closer, the visitor turned slowly, a languid smile playing on his lips.

"Ah... I hope I'm not interrupting." His voice was so sweet, it was almost sickening. The man had long, jet-black hair and pale, almost translucent skin. His features were hauntingly beautiful. "You must be Naoto Kurogane."

Naoto's heart skipped a beat. That single sentence felt like a sharp knife, cutting through him. Every movement, every breath felt like a thin sheet of paper, about to be torn to shreds. He felt

paralyzed, as if moving would be fatal. And then, right beside Naoto, the air vibrated. He heard Raquel's voice, a trembling whisper.

"F-Father..."

It took him three seconds to process the words. And another five to realize she was referring to the black-haired man in front of him.

(Father...!?)

Naoto stared at the man on the sofa, his eyes wide with disbelief and horror. He couldn't quite put his finger on what was so terrifying about the man. Despite his striking beauty, there was something cold and distant about him, a sense of otherworldly power that sent shivers down Naoto's spine.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. My daughter has spoken highly of you. I am... Clavis Alucard." The man smiled thinly, his crimson eyes glinting.

Chapter 3 — Mitsurugi

"Is this really my home?" Naoto couldn't help but wonder, feeling a cold sweat break out on his forehead.

The familiar layout, the walls, the floor, the ceiling—everything was just as he'd left it that morning. Yet, this place now felt completely different, dominated by the presence of an uninvited guest. The once warm and cozy atmosphere had turned cold and tense. At the center of it all, sitting on the sofa, was the hauntingly beautiful black-haired man, Clavis Alucard, who was sipping from a teacup.

"I'm enjoying this. It's quite a good tea leaf," he remarked. The delicate clinking of the cup against its saucer made Naoto gasp. It was a teacup, not a mug—one of the special ones they used for guests. Someone had taken it from the cupboard and made Clavis a cup of tea. The only person who would do that was Haruka. But Haruka was nowhere to be seen.

Clavis seemed to sense Naoto's anxiety and turned his gaze towards the back of the room. "Don't worry. I haven't harmed Haruka. She's just asleep in the other room."

He was probably referring to the Japanese-style room connected to the living room. Naoto wanted to turn around and check if Haruka was really there and if she was safe. But he couldn't move. Clavis's eyes were on him, watching his every move. As long as their eyes met, Naoto felt paralyzed. It was as if if he looked away for even a moment, his head would roll off his shoulders.

(Damn it...)

What kind of monster was this man? Without even touching him, Clavis had managed to instill a deep-seated fear in Naoto. It wasn't the fear of being hurt; it was a fear of the unknown, of the inexplicable.

Clavis was clearly not normal. He was something else entirely. Naoto could see it in the numbers above Clavis's head. They were a jumble of symbols, meaningless to Naoto. It was a clear indication that Clavis was a being beyond his comprehension.

It was then that Naoto felt something soft touch his trembling hand. Recovering his composure, he glanced sideways. Raquel's hand was gently wrapped around his fist.

"It's okay. Haruka is fine," she whispered quickly, her voice tense but reassuring. If Raquel said so, then it must be true.

The cold of her hand against his helped to calm his nerves. Naoto exhaled and turned his gaze back to Clavis.

"Don't be so tense. I'm not going to eat you. I'm just here to talk," Clavis said, his voice oddly menacing despite his claim of harmlessness. He gestured with the hand that was resting on his knee. "Sit down. Or would you prefer I stand?"

Startled by the sudden, almost playful tone in Clavis's voice, Naoto blurted out, "N-no..." His voice trembled, and he felt a pang of self-derision. How pathetic he sounded.

Before Naoto could move, Raquel acted. She sat down on the floor opposite the sofa, across the coffee table. It wasn't the most comfortable position, but given the circumstances, she didn't seem to mind.

Naoto followed her and sat down beside her. As he faced Clavis directly, he felt a wave of oppressive dread wash over him. Even without doing anything, Clavis seemed to exude an aura of cold, detached menace. It was as if he was holding a blade to Naoto's throat, not with a physical weapon, but with his gaze.

"Now then..." Clavis began, his voice smooth and measured. Raquel flinched. Naoto noticed and felt a pang of protectiveness. Even though she had faced off against the 'Immortal Breaker' Relius with such confidence, she seemed intimidated by Clavis.

As if sensing Naoto's concern, Raquel spoke up. "What do you want, Father?" she asked, her chin tilted slightly. Her voice trembled just a little.

Clavis exhaled slowly. "What do I want...? That's quite a question for a daughter to ask her father who has come to take her home."

His youthful appearance made the word 'father' seem out of place, and he said it with a detached coldness that made it even more unsettling. He glanced around the room. "... And I never thought you'd return here."

It was as if he'd muttered to himself, but Naoto heard it clearly.

What did that mean?

Naoto wanted to ask for an explanation for why Raquel had left home and what Clavis meant by "here." But before he could speak, Clavis's gaze returned.

"I see my daughter has been well cared for. Thank you for that... and my apologies for any inconvenience I may have caused."

"No, it wasn't an inconvenience at all," Naoto replied, though it wasn't entirely true. He'd felt more helped than anything. Besides, he hesitated to say anything negative about Raquel to this man.

Clavis let out a soft breath and smiled. "You're a kind young man. Very human," he said, but the words sounded condescending to Naoto. Clavis elegantly steepled his fingers. "As for Raquel, I would like to take her back if you don't mind. What do you think?"

"What? I... I don't know..." Naoto hesitated. He couldn't understand why Clavis was asking him. It was as if he needed Naoto's permission to take Raquel back.

Raquel seemed to have the same thought. She clasped her hands together and leaned forward slightly. "Father, I have no intention of returning," she said firmly.

But her words seemed to extinguish the soft smile on Clavis's face. His red eyes narrowed as he looked at her. The atmosphere grew tense. "Raquel," he said calmly, "I'm speaking to Naoto now." It wasn't a shout, nor was it a threat. It was simply a statement. Yet, it was enough to silence Raquel. She shrank back, looking like a scolded child.

"I'm sorry, Father," she said. Even Naoto was surprised by Raquel's reaction. And when Clavis turned his gaze back to Naoto, Naoto found himself speechless. The quiet intensity in Clavis's eyes was overwhelming.

(Damn, this guy is scary.)

"Naoto," Clavis said.

"Y-yes!" Naoto jumped, forcing himself to speak calmly.

"I understand the situation. I know you must be worried about Raquel coming back with me, but don't worry. I'll take responsibility for your life."

"Wait, what do you mean by that?" Naoto's eyebrows furrowed in confusion as he leaned forward slightly. Clavis's statement, delivered so casually, was completely out of the ordinary.

Clavis's pale hand, perfect in its beauty, moved towards his chest. "From now on, use my life. Even if you die hundreds of times, I will restore you immediately. I will also handle the changes brought on by vampirism."

"Handle? What do you mean by that...?"

"Raquel said she would too, right? I'll get the Azure as well. Is there a problem with that?"

"Wait!" Raquel's voice cut through the air, interrupting Clavis's seemingly gentle but forceful words. It was a strong, assertive voice. Naoto turned to look at her in surprise. Clavis followed suit with a minimal movement.

Raquel was leaning forward on the coffee table. "Father, I..."

"You will return home and behave yourself. I can't afford to lose you."

"No! We'll find the Azure ourselves. I won't obey you..." Before Raquel could finish her sentence, the atmosphere changed. It happened in an instant.

"Be careful what you say," Clavis warned, his voice sweet yet sharp. Raquel was speechless. As she opened her mouth to protest, Clavis's cold fingers reached for her neck. He had stood up and leaned forward, his hand extended as if to grasp her throat.

But...

"I'm surprised... a good reaction." Clavis said, a smile spreading across his face. It was not the elegant, cold smile he usually wore, but a seductive and almost cruel smile that hinted at something inhuman.

Clavis's hand stopped just short of reaching Raquel. Naoto's hand had grabbed it. It was an entirely unconscious act, but it wasn't without intention. Clavis's movement, though seemingly slight, had felt incredibly violent and arrogant. And in that moment, Naoto had acted instinctively.

With a strong grip, Naoto held Clavis's wrist and glared into his crimson eyes, suppressing the tremor in his body.

"Wait... I'm sorry. As much as I appreciate it, I don't want you to take Raquel back, and I don't plan on relying on you. And can you please stop barging in and doing whatever you want?" Naoto had to muster all his courage to say those words. He felt like his heart was about to burst as he met Clavis's menacing crimson gaze. Clavis shook his head slightly.

"Is that so? So I'm being presumptuous... I suppose you're right," Clavis said slowly. Naoto thought he was going to die. This was clearly a bad situation. But instead of trying to shake off Naoto's grip, Clavis looked apologetic. "I apologize for my forwardness. I meant to offer a proper introduction. And another thing... I got carried away."

"What?"

Before Naoto could ask what he meant, Raquel gasped. Naoto was speechless as well. His right arm, which had been holding onto Clavis, had suddenly fallen to his lap. As easily as pulling a doll's arm out of its socket, Clavis detached Naoto's arm without any resistance. Before it hit the floor, Clavis caught it with the hand that had been held captive.

It was definitely Naoto's arm. But it hung limply, and it didn't look human. In fact, it didn't look like any living creature. The arm was severed at the middle of the upper arm and had a smooth, dark red cut. There was no flesh, bone, or nerves visible, just a perfectly smooth, red surface.

"Wh-what is that...?" Naoto managed to stammer. He felt no pain where his arm had been, and there was no blood.

Raquel explained, "I made it with my blood. It was necessary to regenerate your arm."

"So, that's a blood clot?"

"Yes. I think it should function as a normal arm, though," Raquel said, looking a little embarrassed as she glanced at the stump of Naoto's arm.

Naoto turned his gaze back to Clavis. Clavis sat back on the sofa, examining the blood-made arm. "It's not bad, but it's not perfect," he said.

Naoto didn't understand how he had reached that conclusion, but Raquel seemed to. She sat down beside Naoto, imitating Clavis.

Raquel stepped forward. Clavis, his face turned towards his arm, glanced at her without saying a word.

"Raquel, why did you choose 'him'?"

(Choose?)

Naoto was the only one who seemed puzzled. Raquel, who seemed to understand what Clavis was implying, said nothing and simply glared at her father. Realizing that his daughter wasn't going to answer, Clavis gave a small, whispered laugh and gestured for Naoto to come closer.

"Come here. Extend your arm."

"...Yes."

How could he refuse a man like that? Although he felt a sense of unease at this soft pressure, Naoto did as he was told and went to Clavis, offering his right arm—or rather, the shoulder where his right arm had been.

Clavis took the stump of Naoto's arm, which was slightly protruding from the sleeve of Naoto's T-shirt, and perfectly aligned it with the severed end of the arm. Then he muttered some strange words. Instantly, the two ends fused together seamlessly, forming a complete arm.

"Wow... that's amazing."

"How does it feel?"

Surprised by the unexpected phenomenon, Naoto followed Clavis's instructions and bent and straightened his elbow. He made a fist and opened his hand. It moved smoothly.

Although he hadn't felt any particular problems the last time, he realized that the arm felt somewhat heavier and stiffer after Clavis had reattached it. Now, it moved even more naturally than his original arm.

"Don't meddle in this," Raquel said, her voice filled with resentment. Her blood-red eyes turned a pale, cold color.

"Don't deceive me. And this is not for you; it's a token of apology and gratitude to him."

"Naoto is my servant. Don't touch him without my permission."

"And what are you to me?"

Scoffing, Clavis stood up from the sofa. Remembering how Clavis had reached out to Raquel earlier, Naoto instinctively tensed. But with a look that seemed to dismiss such childish bravado, Clavis walked past Naoto towards the living room entrance.

"If you wish, you can keep Raquel for a while. You can do whatever you want with the Azure as well. I won't interfere. She's a spoiled girl, but please take care of her."

"R-really?"

Just a moment ago, Clavis had said he was taking her back. Now, he was just as easily giving her up. It was puzzling. His attitude towards his daughter Raquel and his attitude towards Naoto, who could be considered his subordinate in vampire terms, didn't seem appropriate. Normally, Raquel should be treated with more respect.

"And shouldn't I be treated even more harshly?"

Ignoring Naoto's question, Clavis turned his head towards the entrance, as if he had heard a sound.

"I must apologize for one more thing. It's going to be a bit noisy." As if timing it perfectly—and it was indeed Clavis who timed it perfectly—a loud, almost explosive sound echoed from the entrance. It became clear that the sound was the front door being smashed in when Clavis, standing at the entrance, effortlessly caught the door as it flew towards him, smashing into the hallway wall.

With the casual ease with which one would catch a thrown ball, Clavis grabbed the heavily damaged door. Immediately, something else jumped towards him. It was a man. Leaping over the hallway wall, he let out a roar as he swung his leg in a powerful kick. He aimed for Clavis's torso. The kick was delivered with incredible speed and force. Clavis blocked the kick with the door he was holding.

There was a loud crash, and the shockwave sent the ceiling light in the living room crashing down. The teacup that Clavis had been drinking from earlier was thrown off the table and shattered. The front door, which had been used as a shield, shattered like thin paper and scattered across the living room floor.

"You..." Naoto shouted, recognizing the intruder. It was the same man he had met just an hour or so ago. With his hair tousled and wild, his eyes as sharp as a beast's, his body muscular, and his legs capable of shattering concrete walls, it was Valkenhayn Helsing, one of the 'Immortal Breakers'.

"I found you, Clavis Alucard!" Valkenhayn roared, shaking the room. After landing, he swung his log-like arm from the opposite side. The force of the blow was palpable, causing the air to vibrate. It was a force beyond human capabilities. Yet, Clavis dodged it effortlessly, as if it were nothing, and then grabbed Valkenhayn by the scruff of his neck.

"I must thank you for the tea. Damaging her sanctuary, the kitchen, is unforgivable." Even in this situation, he spoke calmly. Then, with a casual gesture, he lifted Valkenhayn, who was probably taller than him, as if he were a small animal. Then he threw him away as if he were nothing.

With a swift motion, Clavis kicked the airborne Valkenhayn. The force, which seemed impossible from such a simple movement, sent Valkenhayn flying out of the entrance and into the hallway. Unable to resist or defend himself, Valkenhayn was thrown straight out and crashed into the hallway wall, breaking through it and falling to the other side. A thin cloud of dust rose.

Naoto watched in stunned silence. For him, Valkenhayn had been a threat— a monster with an abnormal life force, a dangerous person who tried to kill him without hesitation. Naoto remembered the intense killing intent he had felt when Valkenhayn had almost stomped on his head. But now, that same threat was being casually dealt with. Suddenly, a sound like gears turning swirled at Clavis's feet.

Countless hands rose from the floor, surrounding the stationary vampire, blocking his view of the crimson eyes as they fell downward. The arms were white, supple, and unusually long. Naoto recognized them. At the same time, he realized who was controlling the arms. It was Relius.

The countless hands grabbed Clavis's legs, arms, shoulders, torso, and neck, trying to pull him down. Clavis's posture was slightly disturbed by the immense force pulling him down, and a huge, furry wolf emerged from the rising dust, charging straight at him.

It was a large wolf with thick brown fur, bigger than both Naoto and Clavis. With its white, bared fangs, it jumped powerfully, aiming for Clavis's throat. Without hesitation, Clavis offered his arm to the beast.

There was the sound of flesh tearing and bones breaking. The wolf's jaws could easily tear through a thin human arm in one bite... or so it should have.

The beast let out a low growl. Its fangs were deeply embedded in Clavis's arm, but it couldn't pull it out. The beast's low growl echoed ominously through the room. Holding the wolf, which was still biting his arm, Clavis raised his arm. He held the enormous beast in the air and looked into its fierce eyes, smiling.

"Well, well. It's been a long time since I've seen you in person. It's a pleasure." To Clavis, even the ancient race with both human and wolf forms wasn't particularly special. With a deep frown on its furry brow, the wolf—Valkenhayn in his transformed state—glared at Clavis. Still holding the wolf, Clavis looked down at the countless hands that were surrounding and restraining him.

"And then... the puppeteer. An interesting combination," he said. And then, holding out his hand, the countless hands attached to him were severed one by one, falling to the floor. The beautifully mirror-like severed edges rolled away, gradually merging into the floor as they disappeared.

Next, Clavis turned to face the window. As he did, he swung his arm wide, still holding the wolf aloft. The arm, torn by the massive fang, was severed at the elbow. Scattering blood droplets, Valkenhayn was thrown back with tremendous force. He smashed through the window, shattered the balcony wall that acted as a fence, and continued his trajectory, crashing into the opposite apartment building across the street. A deafening roar echoed through the area, like an explosion, and a violent wind whipped through Naoto's home, knocking over everything in its path.

Naoto crossed his arms in front of his face to protect himself and Raquel. As the wind and dust began to settle, he quickly looked up. Clavis was stepping over the broken glass shards, ignoring the remaining glass in the window frame as he moved towards the balcony. Following Clavis's gaze, which seemed to be filled with a troubled smile as he looked outside, Naoto also looked out.

There was a crater-like hole in the wall of the opposite apartment building, and two figures stood beside it. One was Valkenhayn, who had just been thrown. He had returned to his human form and was supporting himself by driving his strong arm into the apartment building's outer wall like a stake. A little below him, standing calmly on a large, hand-shaped puppet protruding from the wall, was Relius, clad in a purple cloak.

Although Naoto couldn't see their expressions clearly, they were both staring intently at him. As he watched, Clavis lightly shook his wrist and clenched his hand as if to check it. That hand was the one that Valkenhayn had torn off just a moment ago. But there was no trace of injury, and even the torn clothes had been perfectly repaired.

"I apologize for the sudden disturbance, but I must take my leave," Clavis said, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world. He turned his shoulder and looked at his daughter, who was standing a step behind Naoto with deep, unreadable eyes. "That's a nice outfit. It suits you well."

"Haruka picked it out for me," Raquel replied proudly, lightly grasping the collar of her blouse.

Clavis gazed at her steadily. "Then take good care of it," he said, his eyes narrowed. Then, he lightly stepped over the balcony railing and jumped high into the air.

"Wait!" Naoto instinctively grabbed onto the railing. But his worry was unfounded. Clavis easily jumped across the road to the rooftop of the opposite apartment building and turned around as he saw his pursuers climbing up. From there on, it was like watching a movie. Clavis jumped to the roof of the next building with ease, and Valkenhayn and Relius followed, as if they were running on an ordinary road. It didn't take long to lose sight of the three unusual figures. Naoto couldn't tell who had gone in which direction or where they were now.

All Naoto could understand was that, for now, a tremendous situation had been contained. When had the world become such a parade of incomprehensible events that defied his common sense? Staggering slightly, he turned to look back at the scene visible from the balcony, left speechless in shock.

Stumbling backward, Naoto stared at the scene inside the room from the balcony, speechless.

In a word, it was a disaster. The window glass was shattered into pieces, scattered across the balcony and windowsill. Everything in the living room was overturned. The floorboards were gouged, the walls were dented, and there were several holes in the ceiling.

Considering that two extraordinary monsters—or three, if you counted Relius—had rampaged through here for a short period of time, it was almost a miracle that the damage was confined to Naoto's room and its surroundings.

Strangely, amidst the room that had been so mercilessly and indiscriminately damaged, the spot where Naoto and Raquel had been standing, the kitchen, and the teacup on the table were completely unharmed, as if nothing had happened.

"So... what do we do now?" Naoto slumped his shoulders and sighed deeply. It was as if a gas explosion had occurred. However, considering that the kitchen, the most likely source of gas, was undamaged, that explanation didn't hold water. He had no idea how he was going to explain this situation to Haruka and Yuki, the homeowners.

"Wait, Haruka!"

Naoto looked up, startled, and jumped over the glass shards back into the room. He pushed open the sliding door next to the living room and looked inside. There, Haruka, covered in a blanket, was hugging a cushion and fast asleep.

"Mmm... fufu, squishy..." It was unclear whether she was talking or mumbling in her sleep, but she kept snuggling into the cushion. Her sleeping face was so peaceful that it was almost surreal. However, outside the range of Haruka's peaceful sleep, the aftermath of the battle left clear scars.

(So... he was protecting us. Me, Raquel, and Haruka. And probably the kitchen too.)

The realisation hit him, and Naoto was stunned again. It was impossible for only certain areas to be completely unharmed amidst such widespread damage. And not just one place, but clearly multiple specific locations had been left untouched. Clavis had intercepted Valkenhayn, dealt with Relius, and managed to protect the bare minimum.

"I guess I should be grateful. But more than that, it's just unbelievable." Slumping to the floor, Naoto let out a wry smile. Raquel, who had been peering into the Japanese-style room from the side, let out a small sigh of relief.

"It's no surprise she hasn't woken up. She's probably under that man's magic. Until the effect wears off, she won't wake up no matter what disasters occur."

"Hey, is that really okay?"

"As long as she's asleep under the spell, there's no problem. ...Because he's that kind of man," Raquel murmured, adding the last part softly. Naoto scratched his head, feeling a bit uneasy about Raquel's words.

"...You're saying 'that man,' but he's your father, right?" Both Raquel's demeanor towards Clavis and Clavis's attitude towards her felt somehow discordant. When he looked closely, Raquel wore a pained expression, shutting her mouth and turning her face away, as if to warn not to touch on the topic. It was obvious that there was something going on. Naoto felt awkward and couldn't continue the conversation.

For now, he thought he should at least try to clean up the room before Haruka woke up. Just as he was about to stand up, he heard a strange, overly sweet female voice from the living room entrance.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear, what should we do about this?"

Naoto quickly looked up and turned around. There stood a woman he'd never seen before.

She was tall, with honey-brown hair tied up high. Dressed in a white jacket suit, her fitted skirt had a deep slit, showcasing her long, toned legs. With slender glasses perched on her nose and high-heeled shoes on her feet, she exuded an air of a capable woman. However, the voluptuous body line and particularly ample bosom hinted at more sexual allure than intellectual appeal.

Naoto didn't recognize her.

When her unusual purple eyes found Naoto, she blushed excitedly and smiled broadly.

The room was a mess. Except for a few specific places and items, everything else was in ruins, hardly suitable for anyone to live in. Yet here she was, entering without any preamble, completely unfazed by the chaos.

How many uninvited guests have barged in today? For a moment, Naoto wondered if this wasn't his home at all, but someone else's.

"Kurogane Naoto-kun... right?" Standing at the entrance to the living room, the woman in the red suit cupped her blushing cheeks with her hands, looking very pleased to meet him. Raquel, standing nearby, tensed up so much that Naoto thought he might hear a creak.

(Is her social anxiety acting up again...?)

He recalled that Raquel had said she struggled with other women. Glancing sideways, he confirmed her pale face. If that's the case, this guest must be particularly difficult for her. There was an undeniable "feminine aura" about the woman, both in a good and bad way.

"Yes, that's right, but you...?"

"Ah~, I knew it! I just knew it the moment I saw you."

Before Naoto could finish asking who she was, the woman interrupted him, cutting off the end of his sentence and, with it, grabbed his hand. She excitedly closed the distance between them, pressing in.

Naoto was startled by her sudden proximity and recoiled. But he was unable to pull away. The woman had tightly grasped his hand and pulled it towards her chest.

"Hey, wait..." His hand sank into the softness of her ample bosom, the unfamiliar warmth enveloping him. A heat of confusion spread across his neck. He instinctively tried to pull his hand back, but she held on tightly, gazing up at him with a flirtatious look. Her pouting, pink lips, enhanced by lipstick, spoke in a voice that was sweetly teasing.

"I'm really sorry! That surprised you, didn't it? But you see, I'm in a bit of a bind... those people just don't know how to hold back. I keep telling them not to cause trouble for others."

'Those people?' Naoto realized she was probably referring to Valkenhayn and Relius. It was possible Clavis was included, but that seemed unlikely.

"Hmm, but I didn't expect to meet you so soon. I'm so happy..." She whispered dreamily, rubbing her cheek against Naoto's hand as if he were something cherished. It made Naoto instinctively pull back. In doing so, his fingers brushed against the rim of her glasses.

"So... who the hell are you!" Naoto glared at the woman in the suit, asking in a harsh tone. It wasn't that he was disinterested in her body; however, even if she were stunningly beautiful, he didn't appreciate being forced into such an intimate encounter with a stranger. Honestly, it felt unsettling.

The woman's lips curved into an alluring smile. She struck a pose that accentuated her curves, her voice softening as she replied, "You'll find out soon enough, don't worry..." Naoto felt her hand reaching toward his head, as if to pat him. "Aw, you're so cute when you're shy."

"Don't touch me," Naoto said, forcefully swatting away her outstretched hand.

"Ouch," she replied, but she didn't seem intimidated. In fact, she seemed to enjoy being swatted away, giggling softly.

"Well... 'Nice to meet you.' I'm Kiiro from the Mitsurugi Agency. Nice to meet you, Naoto-kun!" Kiiro took a step closer to Naoto and playfully poked his chest with her index finger. Then,

suddenly, she turned to Raquel. "So this is Raquel Alucard, huh?" Suddenly called out by her name, Raquel's expression tightened once more.

The tone of her voice sent chills down Naoto's spine. It was a cold, indifferent voice, as if she were looking at an inanimate object. As she called out to Raquel, Kiiro twisted her body and stood directly in front of her.

"Hmm... I see..." Kiiro appraised Raquel with a scrutinizing gaze. Raquel said nothing in response to the audacious stare, remaining as still as a delicate doll. She appeared outwardly calm, but Naoto could somehow feel that she was like a frog being hypnotized by a snake.

Tucking a strand of her long hair behind her ear, Kiiro leaned in close to Raquel. Raquel blinked. Ignoring the slight change in her expression, Kiiro whispered in Raquel's ear. "...It's troublesome having someone like you wandering around. I'd like to capture and dismantle you right away, but since Naoto-kun is here, I'll let you off this time."

It was unclear whether she meant for Naoto to hear her, but her voice was just loud enough for him to catch. With a cold tone, she looked up and turned a seductive, coquettish smile toward Naoto. "Naoto-kun, you're really troublesome too. Look at what a mess they've made of your room."

"Uh..." Naoto managed to squeeze out that much, furrowing his brow. He could think of many reasons why he disliked this woman, but beyond that, he had an instinctive aversion to her. There was something very unpleasant about her.

(It's you who's being a nuisance... just leave already.)

He wanted to tell her to get out, but there was something he wanted to ask her first. She seemed to know something about the situation. Forcing himself to calm down, Naoto opened his mouth.

"So, what do you want, Kiiro-san from the Mitsurugi Agency? You barged in here, so you must have a reason."

"Don't look at me like that, it makes me shiver."

"Hey!"

"The reason I'm here is to clean up the mess those people made... and to greet you... That's why," she replied, a mischievous smile playing on her lips as she ran her perfectly manicured fingers along her mouth.

"A greeting? Why?" Naoto demanded, his voice rising in anger.

"Of course, to deepen our relationship," she replied, her voice dripping with innuendo.

"So... what the hell..." Naoto ran his hands through his hair, ruffling it roughly. Kiiro watched him with a kind of dreamy satisfaction, her tongue darting across her painted lips.

"I'm serious. Naoto-kun and... that Raquel Alcard over there are very important for the Mitsurugi Agency's objectives." Her words, implying that she wanted him to ask for more information, irritated Naoto. He rubbed his temples.

"What exactly is that objective? Stop beating around the bush." Even as he asked, he had an inkling of what Kiiro referred to as the 'Mitsurugi Agency's objective.' Kiiro blinked her large, reddish-purple eyes, which sparkled ominously.

"The annihilation of the immortal monster, Clavis Alucard. That is the Mitsurugi Agency's tragic goal." Raquel reacted slightly at the mention of her father's name. Kiiro crossed her arms over her ample chest and adjusted her slim glasses with her fingertips.

"You saw it for yourself just now, didn't you? The mere fact that such a monstrous creature exists is more than enough of a threat to the world." Naoto had no objections to the fact that Clavis was a monster. However, he was deeply dissatisfied with Kiiro's dismissive tone. With a look of both dissatisfaction and resentment, Naoto glared at Kiiro.

"So, the Mitsurugi Agency is a monster-hunting group?"

"Hmm, something like that... Our job is to capture and dissect creatures like that one and create specimens." Kiiro chuckled mischievously. It was an unsettling feeling. This time, Naoto openly glared at her. "Just kidding. Hehe, you look scary."

With a voice as soothing as a cat's purr, Kiiro laughed and leaned closer to Naoto, wrapping her arm around his neck and gently stroking his cheek with her palm. Feeling her warmth, devoid of any hesitation or embarrassment, only deepened Naoto's frown. But Kiiro gazed at him intensely, as if finding his troubled expression endearing, while still drawing nearer.

"Our purpose is to uphold and manage the order of the human world. 'The eternal peace of the world.' That is the ideal that the Mitsurugi Agency advocates." In a near-embrace, Naoto felt the plush softness of Kiiro pressing against his chest.

Naoto tried to pull away, but Kiiro's arm, wrapped around his neck, refused to let him go.

"Sounds suspicious." Both Kiiro's words and her presence gave him no desire to engage. Grabbing Kiiro's arm, he forcibly pulled it away. Even so, she remained close, placing the hand he had just pulled away on her ample chest as if to display it.

"My role is to eliminate the 'threats' that endanger that. And right now, at the top of that list is Clavis Alucard."

That, of course, referred to the eternal peace of the world. Naoto's expression darkened as he turned his face toward the shattered window.

"What about Valkenhayn and Relius? I think they're pretty big threats too, don't you?" Compared to Clavis, they might be lesser threats, but they were far beyond what ordinary humans could handle. There was an insurmountable gap between them. But Kiiro shrugged and snorted, seemingly dismissive.

"Anything that can be controlled by humans isn't a threat. After all... we can kill them if we want to." The casual way she said it sent a shiver down Naoto's spine. That was it. This was the part of her that made Naoto uneasy—her sudden, casually violent remarks.

"So you're saying that anything that's beyond human control should be killed?"

"If it's for the sake of world order, then yes," she replied with a beautiful, almost innocent smile. Then, her voice softened.

"Hey, Naoto, do you know how many people disappeared during the 'mass disappearance' incidents?" Her smile remained, but her voice was ominous. Naoto spoke cautiously, as if he were being told a ghost story.

"Mass disappearances... you mean the abandoned apartment complex?"

"That place is one example, but it's not the only one. That apartment complex is just the tip of the iceberg. In total, '128,932 people' have disappeared in incidents around the world." Naoto was startled. He didn't know that so many disappearances had occurred in so many places, or that so many people had vanished. Naoto didn't clearly remember the events from that time, but if that were the case, it should have become a much bigger incident, making headlines worldwide. He had no recollection of it being covered in such a significant way.

Kiiro looked at Naoto with an unsettling gaze, her lips curled into a smile, as if testing him.

"What if I told you that Clavis Alucard was responsible for all of those disappearances? What would you think?"

"What...?"

"If it's just about making that many people disappear at once, human-made weapons can do it too. But weapons don't have will. Without a person to manage and use them, no matter how powerful, they won't be activated. They can even be dismantled. But Clavis Alcard is different." Kiiro continued, emphasizing her point. "He acts freely, without being managed by anyone, using his power as he wishes. He can wipe out a large number of people simply because he wants to. What else would you call that but a threat?"

"...Isn't that a bit too convenient? Just because weapons lack will doesn't mean the people using and managing them don't have their own intentions. Isn't that the same 'threat' you talk about?"

"That can't be helped. After all, this world exists for humans."

"For humans, huh..." Naoto still felt uneasy and bit his lip in frustration. Kiiro tilted her head in a coy manner, her hands clasped in front of her chest.

Kiiro clasped her hands in front of her chest and tilted her head coquettishly. *"So, until we can eliminate Clavis Alucard, I'm afraid I'll have to keep an eye on you and your friends. It would be easier to just confine that little girl, but it's unlikely that Clavis would come to her rescue, and he might just abandon her and disappear."*

For Kiiro and the agency, Raquel's appearance in Shinkawahama likely presented an unprecedented opportunity to see Clavis. They couldn't let this chance slip by.

"But don't worry. Monitoring just means watching for any contact from Clavis Alucard, so you can go about your usual life as you please. The agency won't interfere with your day-to-day activities, and we won't let that happen. If anything happens, we'll back you up."

At those words, Naoto had a realisation. It had been nagging at him all along. "I see, so it was you who cleaned up the blood and bodies in the abandoned complex and fixed the roads."

It wasn't the magical powers Raquel used that had cleared away the traces of last night's supernatural events; it was clearly the work of human hands. Such repairs and cover-ups had been accomplished overnight. Though the name and existence of the agency were not publicly known, it was evident they operated on a considerable scale.

Kiiro leaned in closer, whispering softly as she spoke. A faint, pleasant scent of perfume wafted from her. "That's nothing. I'll have this room fixed up in no time. Until then, I'll prepare a hotel room for you to stay in."

"... I don't suppose you'll be staying at that hotel too, will you?"

"That's a secret," she replied with a knowing wink, her finger pressed to her lips.

"I'll pass. I don't need it."

Naoto involuntarily took a half-step back. It might be overthinking, but he couldn't shake the feeling that there was a moral danger in Kiiro's heated gaze.

While his carefree friend Shinnosuke might have jumped at the chance, even though he found Kiiro's seductive gestures alluring, he couldn't bring himself to touch her. Closing his eyes and giving in might be the easy way out, but he absolutely didn't want that.

"Hey, Naoto-kun. Forget about that little castle and come with me... I'll make you very happy. And besides..."

Ignoring Naoto's open invitation, Kiiro's hand crept up his chest, tracing his skin and feeling his warmth. She leaned closer, her eyes filled with desire, as she stroked his chest.

"I'll protect you," she said earnestly.

Naoto frowned, confused. He was perplexed not only by Kihiro's overly intimate behavior but also by the undercurrents in her words.

"... I'll pass on that."

Grabbing the hand that was trying to crawl up his back, Naoto pushed Kihiro away.

Kihiro didn't resist much as she stepped back, but her expression remained provocatively playful.

"Too bad. But... I'm sure you'll change your mind eventually." She gave him a theatrical wink, her gaze intense and possessive. Then, as she turned to leave the living room, she paused.

"Hey... what kind of 'Drive' do you have, Naoto-kun?" Her smile was sharp and calculating. Naoto didn't understand her question or the meaning behind her expression.

"Huh? 'Drive'? What are you talking about?" Kihiro smiled deeper and shook her head slightly. Her hair cast a shadow across her face. "It's nothing. Well, bye. See you later, Naoto-kun."

The rhythmic sound of high heels walking outside the entrance gradually faded away. Finally, silence returned to Naoto's room. And then... Raquel collapsed behind Naoto.

"Whoa, what the hell!?"

"I can't take it anymore... it's impossible... the worst type..." Her voice trembled, tight with fear. Raquel's eyes were completely vacant.

Naoto had almost forgotten about her presence after she had been silent for so long, but it seemed that the double whammy of his father and Kihiro had dealt a significant blow. Her limp fingers sprawled on the floor as if they were about to convey some tragic dying message.

"What the heck is going on!? What happened!? What was all that noise!? Is Raquel okay!?"

The sudden voice belonged to Haruka, who had woken up at the perfect moment. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she was looking around in confusion, her tousled hair framing her face. Next to her was Raquel, who had collapsed from stress. The room was a scene of panic with Haruka's disheveled state. Naoto placed a hand on his forehead, feeling the weight of the situation. This was just the beginning of a difficult time.

He tried to calm Haruka down, moving Raquel to the futon where Haruka had been sleeping. Naoto then attempted to explain the situation in the midst of the chaos of the half-destroyed room. However, there was no way he could tell her the full truth. As a result, he ended up giving a very fragmented explanation, and though Haruka listened, she wore a perplexed expression the entire time.

Just then, a man in a black suit, identifying himself as a member of the "Mikazuki Agency," arrived with a lawyer and began to explain everything unilaterally. He stated that the entire incident was due to the agency's mismanagement and that they would take full responsibility for

the damages. There was no need to worry about the repairs for both the room and the shared areas of the building; everything would be restored as quickly as possible.

However, the complicated terminology and unfamiliar legal terms made the explanation difficult to grasp. Haruka repeatedly asked for simpler explanations, but the lawyer and the agents kept reiterating that they would restore everything and had to follow the set procedures. They managed to create an uncomfortable situation that hinted at "complex circumstances" without going into detail.

About an hour after their visit, when Haruka was thoroughly exhausted, the Mikazuki Agency finished their "explanation" and added, "Now we will explain the situation to the owner as well," before leaving Naoto's room.

Nothing had been dramatically resolved. Still, in terms of preventing Haruka from thinking too deeply about the matter, the Mikazuki Agency had achieved more than enough.

"...I wonder if my mom will hear the same story..." Naoto thought repeatedly, feeling guilty as he watched Haruka, who sighed heavily after sipping the special tea he had made for her.

The round wall clock's hands were nearing eleven o'clock at night. The living room, furnished in light brown, was quiet and filled with a familiar atmosphere.

Naoto poured himself a cup of Earl Grey milk tea from a borrowed mug and sat down on the white sofa in front of the large TV. He stared blankly at the blank LCD screen.

This wasn't Naoto's home. It was Haruka's.

Originally, he was supposed to stay at home, semi-camping in his relatively undamaged bedroom, while Raquel stayed with Haruka. But Haruka had strongly insisted that he couldn't allow that, and so he had ended up staying at her place.

The Haruka family occupied the entire top floor of the apartment building, so there was more space and more rooms than Haruka and her mother, Yuki, needed. Naoto was allowed to use one of the spare rooms.

Currently, Haruka was in the bath with Raquel. Well, Haruka thought they were enjoying themselves together, but Raquel had protested that she felt uncomfortable with her pale, tense face. However, Haruka had insisted that she endure it as part of her lodging fee.

Left alone in the living room, Naoto was leisurely enjoying his before-bed tea. The tea in the cup was still warm, and as he sipped it, the soft scent of milk and the bergamot of the Earl Grey filled his nose. The tea leaves were a bit old, but the aroma was still strong. It must have been well-preserved. But Naoto's mood was anything but calm.

When given such a quiet night, he couldn't help but think about everything that had happened.

(Thinking back, I only met Raquel yesterday...) He sighed deeply, leaning back against the sofa and gazing up at the ceiling.

It was hard to believe, but he had met Raquel, seemingly died and come back to life, seen magic in the abandoned apartment complex, been nearly killed by Valkenhayn in the city, found Clavis waiting for him at home, and then his house had been half-destroyed by Clavis, Valkenhayn, and Relius. On top of that, that strange woman, Kiiro, had broken into his house. All of this had happened yesterday and today.

"Ah... My head is about to explode," he muttered. Naoto put his cup down on the table and lay down on the sofa. There was too much going on, and he couldn't sort it all out. The events were swirling around in his head, but that was all. The only thing he could understand was that he had been caught up in something completely insane.

Sighing again, Naoto lifted his right arm and looked at it. He rolled up the sleeve of his T-shirt.

(I think... it was cut around here.)

He could roughly pinpoint the location, but when he looked at it, he couldn't tell where his own arm ended and the artificial one began. There was no strange feeling when he touched it. It was an arm made from Raquel's blood, modified in some way by Clavis.

"A vampire... an immortal... a threat," he murmured. He let his guard down, speaking out because Haruka wasn't there. Even now, when he looked in the mirror, he could clearly see the number "0" above his head. It was a sign that he had changed.

But he didn't feel that he was "not a normal human." Perhaps it was because of his peculiar eyes; he had never thought of himself as "normal" to begin with. Now, he simply had the added trait of regenerative abilities.

He felt that he, Kurogane Naoto, hadn't changed that much.

But that was only for a year.

In a year, Naoto would change. He would become something other than human. Something other than Kurogane Naoto. He had no idea what form he would take or what kind of monster he would become.

"Azure..." He lowered his raised arm limply and covered his eyes, unconsciously speaking the name. If he had the Azure, he could return to being a normal human. He could live beside Haruka as he always had. He could remain unchanged. But if he really had the Azure, would that solve everything? After all...

(Does the Azure even really exist...?)

He had no idea where it was or what it looked like. There was almost no information available. Raquel had said the same.

What also troubled him was that woman from the Mitsurugi Agency, Kiiro Hikagami.

"Hikagami... there's no way she's just a coincidence."

Everything felt so confusing. He was exhausted. He was even tired of thinking... Naoto felt the weight of his arm as he sank deeper into slumber, gradually slipping into sleep.

...He could hear singing.

While still half-conscious, lost in the drowsiness that was melting his senses, Naoto muttered to himself.

(Ah, I... must have been asleep.)

As he wandered the boundary between dream and reality, he understood. The sound he heard was a lullaby. It wasn't really a lullaby, just a simple children's song, but Naoto knew someone who always thought of it as a lullaby.

It was Haruka.

Originally, it seemed her mother, Yuki, had sung it to her as a lullaby. That's why Haruka always sang it when lullabies were mentioned. The gentle melody invited sleep, a sweet song.

Drawn by that voice, Naoto suppressed his desire to sleep fully and slowly opened his eyes.

"...Whoa. You surprised me," he exclaimed without thinking.

The first thing that caught Naoto's eye when he opened his eyes was Haruka's pink pajamas. The thin fabric softly bulged outward, her breasts partially blocking his view of her face.

Because of that, he couldn't immediately see her expression.

The distance to the curves was surprisingly close, and if Haruka bent down even a little, they seemed like they would fall right onto Naoto's face. More than that...

(I never really noticed before, but... she has surprisingly large breasts.)

The silhouette visible through the pink fabric looked different from when it was supported by a bra. She probably wasn't wearing one.

Thinking that, Naoto couldn't help but be distracted by the mounds so close to his face.

"Oh, sorry. Did I wake you up?" Noticing him, Haruka stopped singing and looked down at him from between her two generous breasts.

Naoto jumped slightly. ...They swayed.

"No. You should wake me up. I haven't taken a bath yet," he said casually, avoiding her gaze.

It was then that he realized his situation. He must have fallen asleep on the sofa and Haruka, having just come out of the bath, had found him and used her knee as a pillow.

No wonder his head felt warm. The scent of soap and shampoo made his fingertips tingle slightly.

Haruka had her hair down. It had been a long time since he had seen her like that. Come to think of it, it had been quite a while since he had spent the night in this house.



"I thought you looked tired. Oh, but I was going to wake you up at twelve."

"R-really?" Naoto replied casually, but he was unsure of what to do. Should he wake up or just stay like this? It felt awkward to force himself awake and push Haruka away, but remaining in this position was also uncomfortable.

As if gently calming Naoto's thoughts, Haruka's hand brushed through his hair. She sank her fingers into his locks like she was soothing a child, stroking his hair slowly. Without thinking, Naoto let out a deep breath. Haruka's touch felt strangely comforting. Pushing aside feelings of shyness or embarrassment, he found himself at ease with the soft sensation of her hand.

Listening to the gentle sound of her fingers running through his hair, Naoto looked up at Haruka with a furtive glance. Once the explanation from the Mitsurugi Agency was over, it was determined that the chaos in Naoto's room was caused by an accident involving a drone. He thought it was a ridiculous and far-fetched story, but Haruka accepted it.

Or rather, it might be more accurate to say she had no choice but to accept it. It was just as impossible to affirm it as it was to deny it. That was the logic they had presented.

Haruka didn't remember anything about Clavis. According to Raquel, that was part of the magic. So far, there were no signs of any abnormalities in Haruka. Given what Clavis had done, it seemed unlikely that there would be any negative effects in the future. At least, that's how Naoto felt.

"It feels nostalgic having you stay over at our place, Nao-kun." With a soft smile, Haruka murmured as she continued to stroke his hair.

"..... It's been about three years, hasn't it?" Naoto replied, nodding.

Haruka nodded vigorously. It wasn't the last time he had stayed over. Until three years ago, Naoto had lived in this house. But he had asked to move to a different room.

"Why don't you just live with me again? There's a spare room," Haruka said, her tone tinged with a hint of sincerity. Naoto furrowed his brow.

"Hey, that's not a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Why not... well, we're both adults now. It would be... complicated."

"It wouldn't be," Haruka replied, her answer unexpectedly quick and straightforward.

"Huh...?"

Was it his imagination? Haruka's voice seemed unusually serious, and Naoto replied in a dumbfounded tone. Looking up at Haruka, he saw that she was staring at him intently. Her large, dark eyes seemed slightly moist, perhaps due to the warmth of her body after her bath.

The gentle hand that had been stroking Naoto's head in a steady rhythm suddenly stopped, as if holding its breath.

"I'm not troubled at all. What about you, Naoko-kun... are you troubled?"

"Haruka..." Naoto tried to speak, but the words got stuck in his throat. Above Haruka's upturned face, the number was rising. It was 20. Haruka's hand, which had been in his hair, slowly, hesitantly, and timidly touched Naoto's cheek. Her fingertips were warm.

"Naoko-kun, I..." She probably hadn't intended to finish that sentence. Or perhaps her emotions had overwhelmed her. She slowly closed her eyelids. Her long eyelashes lifted at the tips, and her eyes seemed to be drawn to Naoto, as if she were trying to embrace something very important.

The scent of soap made him dizzy. The soft chest touching his cheek conveyed the steady beat of the heart hidden within it. The pounding heartbeat was a sign of tension. Was this heartbeat Haruka's or his?

(Oh no, this is bad)

He couldn't resist the current that seemed to be pulling him down. He couldn't even think about whether he should resist it. Just as he breathed in...

"What are you two doing?" A voice, so innocent and casual, interrupted them, and Naoto's heart, which felt like it was about to burst from the tension, actually felt like it had burst.

"Wha—!?" Naoto hurriedly twisted his body and slipped off the sofa—or rather, fell off from his back. He hit the floor harder than he expected and writhed in pain. Meanwhile, Haruka looked around nervously, her face flushed bright red, and hurriedly got up.

"R-r-r-Raquel!" Her tongue got tangled, and she tilted her head in confusion. Raquel looked at the flustered Haruka curiously and tilted her head in the opposite direction. Sliding down the floor, Naoto moved a couple more steps away from the sofa and pressed his hand against his chest, trying to calm his pounding heart.

(That was a shock... That was a shock, and it was dangerous too...)

Just a few seconds ago, right there, on the sofa where he had sat countless times with Haruka watching TV, what was about to happen? Naoto's brain was sending out danger signals, telling him not to think about it. But he couldn't help it.

Just now, he and Haruka had...

"By the way, Haruka, Naoto, there's something I want to ask you," Raquel said, clearly noticing something was off with both Haruka and Naoto, her curiosity piqued.

"She probably just sees me as a plaything. Oh well," Raquel said indifferently, losing interest and turning her attention to her own business. She tossed her still slightly damp blonde hair over her shoulder like a veil, letting it shimmer in the living room light. Then, she turned and pointed.

"Who is that woman?"

"Huh?" Naoto and Haruka both looked in the direction Raquel was pointing, toward the living room entrance.

There, hidden in the shadow of the door between the hallway and the living room, was a woman. She had short, bright brown hair that almost looked orange, and she was wearing a pantsuit. Her eyes were narrowed as she watched them with a curious gaze.

Naoto was speechless and nearly fainted at the sight of her, while Haruka blushed even redder and cried out, "M-Mom!"

The woman there was Haruka's mother, Yuki Hayami.

Yuki Hayami was a bold and generous woman who had raised Haruka single-handedly and even taken care of Naoto. Naoto didn't know her exact age, but she still maintained a youthful beauty that didn't seem possible for someone with a high school-aged daughter.

Although she was busy with work and rarely home, she always showed an abundance of love for both Haruka and Naoto. That's why Naoto thought of her more like a real mother than anything else, and he couldn't look up to her enough for all she had done for him.

And so...

"Wow! What is this? It's incredible, so silky! Oh, what beautiful golden hair! You look just like a doll! So cute! So lovely!"

There was no way Naoto could stop Yuki from sitting down at the dining table, pulling Raquel onto her lap, stroking her hair, nuzzling her cheek, and examining her face, enjoying her soft touch.

"N-Naoto... please..." Raquel looked at Naoto with dull, cloudy eyes and pleaded for help in a barely audible voice. Considering Kiiro, Haruka in the bath, and now Yuki assaulting Raquel with affection, Naoto couldn't help but feel a little sorry for her. But he sat in the chair opposite Yuki, as he usually did, and slowly turned his gaze away from Raquel as if to escape.

(I'm sorry, Raquel... There's nothing I can do for you.)

There was no way anyone could stop Yuki from getting so excited.

Even now, Haruka was explaining everything to Yuki: who Raquel was, why she was there, and what had happened today. But Yuki seemed completely absorbed in Raquel's appearance rather than her daughter's story.

"And so, we're letting her stay over... Mom, are you listening?" Haruka finally put her hands on her hips in exasperation, and Yuki looked up, still stroking Raquel's head.

"Yes, yes, I'm listening. And you said something about someone from Mitsurugi coming and saying something like that. What was it, a drone? Something about compensation and confidentiality... I don't remember very well, but it was so noisy. They talked for so long." Yuki waved her hand dismissively and made an exaggeratedly bored face. Naoto couldn't help but laugh at her childish gesture and expression.

"Ah... so you heard about that too." Haruka said, offering a sympathetic smile. She was reminded of the overwhelming fatigue that came after the lengthy explanation.

However, Yuki seemed completely unfazed and carefree.

"Well, you two... no, I guess it's three of you now. I'm glad you're all safe. We can fix the house, but we can't replace you guys." She smiled, showing her white, even teeth.

In Yuki's case, there was no need for Raquel's "Slave Red" to forcefully explain the situation. Yuki must know more about Naoto's family relations than Haruka does, and she was capable of calmly judging whether a cousin like Raquel could even exist. As an adult, she could probably imagine the level of commotion such an incident involving unmanned aircraft would cause.

And yet, Yuki didn't show any doubt or ask any questions. She accepted Haruka and Naoto's story as fact and welcomed the golden-haired visitor without hesitation. If you asked her why, she would undoubtedly answer that there was no reason to doubt them if Haruka and Naoto said it was true.

"And, Mom, about Raquel, can she stay over?" Haruka, who had already decided to let Raquel stay without her mother's permission, asked Yuki apologetically. Yuki hugged Raquel tightly once before nodding, as if she were happy to have another member of the family.

"Of course. I'd welcome her with open arms. In fact, why don't you just move in?"

"N-no... that's impossible..." Raquel's body stiffened at the proximity of Yuki's face, which was peering in from behind. She looked like a startled kitten, bristling at an unexpected situation.

Seeing Raquel like that, Yuki couldn't hold back and hugged her tightly again.

"Even your confused face is cute!"

Outside Yuki's line of sight, Raquel's neck drooped backward in resignation.

Thinking that she might finally run out of breath, Naoto got up to separate them, but before he could, Haruka gently freed Raquel from her mother's grasp.

"Thank you, Mom. Well, we're going to bed now," Naoto said. Looking at the clock, he realized that the hour and minute hands had long passed the top. It would soon be one o'clock.

"Naoto, you should go to bed early too. You have school tomorrow," Haruka said.

"Yeah," he replied lightly, watching Haruka leave the living room. Prompted by Haruka, Raquel glanced at Naoto with a troubled expression but followed after Haruka, albeit hesitantly. Her long, unkempt golden hair swayed gently against the back of the orange pajamas she borrowed from Haruka. Perhaps because she was petite, she looked like a timid little animal, and Naoto couldn't help but smile secretly.

(She's actually pretty cute when she looks so normal)

The pajamas made Raquel appear younger than during the day, and it was hard to believe she was the same person who had tried to take off her underwear in public. If she could get used to wearing clothes like this, it would ease his mind.

"Well, I'll... " Naoto got up from his chair, ready to go to bed. But Yuki stopped him.

"Hey Naoto. Could you make me some tea?"

"Tea? That's rare for you, Yuki-san." Usually, she always went for coffee.

"Just this once. Your tea is delicious." He couldn't say no to that. Muttering something about how he couldn't help it, Naoto took out the teapot and boiled some water in the electric kettle.

Unlike Naoto, Haruka and Yuki didn't keep various types of tea. They only had ordinary Darjeeling tea bags, the Earl Grey that Naoto had just made, and a peach tea that Haruka had received from a friend.

Since she had asked him, he chose Earl Grey and poured the fragrant tea into Yuki's favorite mug, placing it in front of her.

"Here you go. Would you like some milk?"

"No, this is fine." As she reached for the cup, Yuki looked at Naoto. Her gaze urged him on.

"Well, sit down then."

".....What is it?"

He had no reason to refuse. Naoto pulled out the chair opposite Yuki and sat down. As soon as he sat down, Yuki grinned mischievously.

"Sorry about earlier. You should have come back a little later."

"W-what...?"

If he had made a cup of tea for himself along with Yuki's and had taken a sip now, he would have definitely sprayed hot tea all over his face.

Or rather, why would she say that so suddenly? He had been bracing himself for a serious conversation, but her unexpected and lewd smile made Naoto lose his composure, causing him to rock back in his chair.

Holding up her cup, Yuki held up her thumb and index finger a few centimeters apart.

Holding the cup at eye level, she said, "You were so close. What a shame... If only you were just a little bit..."

"Hey, cut it out," Naoto interrupted. The scene from earlier flashed through his mind. The scent of soap tickling his nose and Haruka's breathless gasp that he couldn't stop. As Naoto tried to look away, Yuki followed his gaze and continued her attack with a bright, cheerful voice, as if she had come up with a great idea.

"Oh, how about sneaking into Haruka's room later? Just take what you want!"

"Are you serious?! Is that really something a mother should say!?"

"Haha. You have to experience a lot of things while you're young," Yuki laughed merrily, raising her mug. She took a deep breath and looked at the dark surface of the tea with kind eyes.

"...Seriously though, Haruka doesn't have a father. I really want her to find a normal husband and build a normal family."

That was Yuki's true feeling, something she always carried in her heart. Naoto knew very well how warmly Yuki looked at Haruka. So, when he heard her affectionate words, dropped casually in between her teasing remarks, Naoto breathed a sigh of relief.

".....Yeah, I think so too." Naoto felt the same way. He wanted Haruka to be happy. Always and forever.

"So, what do you think?" Leaning forward on the dining table, Yuki rested her soft, ample chest on her arm and poked her face at Naoto. Her curious gaze pierced him, waiting for his reaction. Naoto made a wry face at her obvious intentions. Just when things were getting serious, she had to turn it into this.

"What do you mean, what do I think?"

"My Haruka is a good girl, you know? She's the cutest in the world," Yuki said with a cheerful smile. Naoto sighed. He already knew that Yuki thought Haruka was the cutest in the world.

"Then don't sell her short like that..."

"I'm just being realistic," she replied casually. Naoto couldn't come up with a quick reply. Yuki looked at Naoto with narrowed eyes, seeming pleased. She took a sip of her tea.

"I think you could make Haruka happy for the rest of your life," she said. "I wouldn't entrust Haruka to anyone else." Naoto could only look at Yuki with a complicated expression as she spoke softly, as if she were taking a deep breath.

(You're overestimating me, Yuki...) He murmured to himself. He did want Haruka to be happy. He wanted her to be even happier than she was now, and to be at peace.

"Yeah, and if there's anything I can do for that, I won't hold back." But that didn't come from a feeling that he could make Haruka happy. Rather, it was because he didn't have that confidence that he cared about her happiness. He didn't have the power to make Haruka happy in a peaceful light. He thought so firmly. And right now, that wasn't the point. More than wondering who Haruka's happiness would be with and how, Naoto needed the Azure right now.

If he couldn't find what he needed to find and get it, he would become a source of unhappiness for Haruka in a year. He realized again that he had to find it no matter what.

".....If that's all you have to say, I'm going to bed now," he said, making sure his tone wasn't too abrupt. In truth, he was tired—physically, but even more so mentally.

"Okay, okay, good night," Yuki said lightly, without trying to stop him. She raised her teacup as if to say, "Cheers."

Even in this casual moment, she seemed to care for Naoto in her own way. He offered a wry smile in response to her innocent affection, which was almost like that of a real mother, and began to leave the living room.

Then, from behind him, he heard, "Naoto." Her tone was slightly different this time—more insistent. Naoto turned to look over his shoulder. Yuki didn't turn to face him, still gazing into her cup as she spoke. "Be careful of the Mitsurugi Agency."

Those words came from someone who knew. Even if she didn't specify what he should be cautious about, it was clear she had some inkling of the situation.

Unable to brush it off or joke about it, and certainly unable to ask her what she knew, Naoto turned his back to Yuki. He couldn't carelessly involve her; if he did, it would draw her into this mess. Regardless of her knowledge, if she wasn't directly involved, she was an outsider. Just as he felt strongly about not troubling Haruka, he felt the same about Yuki.

"Good night," he said and closed the living room door behind him.

It was a quiet night. And it was a very good night. The moon was obscured by thin, dark clouds, and the city was wet from the sudden shower that had started after dusk. Everything was damp.

Thanks to that, the streetlights were bright, and the darkness was deep. Once you stepped into the thick shadows, the night would instantly swallow you up and hide you.

It was already past midnight. The humid air from the unexpected rain and the lingering cool temperature made the Shinkawahama station area uncomfortably tepid. Perhaps thanks to this, there were fewer people than usual, and no one would notice if you were in the back of an old game center on a back street off the main road.

Therefore, no one would notice or care if a man crossed in front of the concrete wall in the damp dead of night. From shadow to shadow, from depth to depth. With gliding steps, the man entered the small park next to the parking lot.

He was an eerie man. Dressed in a black stand-collar shirt, his body was thin and lanky, and his limbs were also long and thin. His neatly combed gray hair made him look like a gentleman who would fit right into high society, but the black tattoo that covered most of his faceless jaw indicated that he was not a person from the bright world. His eyes were narrow and sharp, and they lacked any human warmth. If anything, they conveyed coldness and cruelty. But now, his eyes held a smoldering passion as he stopped in front of the unmarked gray concrete wall.

There was nothing there. Not even a single graffiti tag drawn by a mischievous child. But as if there was something there, he stared intently and slowly raised his long arm to touch the cold wall with his wide hand.

Slowly, he traced the wall with his palm. Then, as if blood were seeping from the wall, red letters appeared. Leaning in close, he ran his eyes over the newly appeared letters. He read each one carefully, as if verifying them, and memorized them.

".....Well, well, this is an interesting invitation," he said, raising his thin eyebrows and a sharp smile appeared at the corner of his mouth. Leaning in even closer, he brought his nose close to the red letters and sniffed. He sniffed at it, as if to make sure of its existence, and then stuck out his tongue without hesitation. His unusually long tongue was tattooed black, just like his face. He licked the wall with it.

"Ah..."

Was it satisfaction or admiration? He let out a deep breath and stood up, stroking the wall. At his feet, something quickly crawled out from the depths of the shadows.

"Ki-chi-chi."

It was a strange insect about the size of a human head, making a sound like the clattering of armor. He couldn't see it clearly in the night, but the man knew it was a dull blue color and had red, bulging eyeballs. Its flat body, with many joints, was injured and its movements were slow and awkward.

Looking down at the deformed creature that had come crawling towards him, seeking its master, the man spoke to it in a very expressive voice.

"Thank you for guiding me this far. I only expected to get a whiff, but thanks to you, I've even managed to savor her flavor. I'm grateful," he said, a smile playing on his lips. He lifted his leg and brought it down with all his might onto the insect's back.

The sound of something hard and thin breaking and soft flesh bursting echoed through the late-night park. The green body fluid that had been abundantly stored inside the creature splattered everywhere and quickly evaporated in the open air, leaving only a charred mark behind.

The man turned back to the wall. The wall where the red letters had appeared. It seemed to have served its purpose. The letters were fading and disappeared before his eyes as he watched.

Still, as if admiring the fact that they had been there, the man ran his hand along the wall. And he let out a trembling sigh.

"Wonderful..." His voice, hoarse, spoke with rapture. He furrowed his brow, looking at the now blank wall. He folded his long fingers and clenched them as if to confirm the sensation he had just felt. His breath was filled with admiration and ecstasy.

"That transparent voice I heard the other day... and the wonderful smell and taste to match it... Oh, I can't wait to touch you with these hands. I long to taste you directly with this tongue. If I could see your noble form, my body would surely tremble with excitement!" With heartfelt passion and desire for the person who wasn't there, he trembled with uncontrollable anticipation. The long-awaited moment was not far off. It was very close. What he sought was right beside him, breathing, bleeding, and living its life. How joyful it was.

He spread his arms wide and looked up at the sky. He looked up at the moon, whose silhouette was faintly visible behind the dark, hazy clouds. Through the moon, he spoke to the beloved soul.

"For you, Spinner-Superior, I will prepare the finest insect... Raquel-Alcard!"

Chapter 4 - Secret

Perhaps I should have realized when I woke up.

It was a lovely sunny Monday morning. The temperature still had a hint of summer, but the occasional breeze was quite pleasantly cool.

I blended into the usual classroom scenery with my usual level of enthusiasm, and as always, I killed time between the bell and the arrival of the homeroom teacher, feeling a bit sleepy.

I thought about reading some trivial news uploaded to my phone, but with the school's ban on mobile usage, Shinkawahama High School had no signal anywhere. As a result, I had nothing to do and was just thinking about killing a little time when, as always, the homeroom teacher appeared.

It was just another morning like any other. However, I was utterly taken aback, doubting my own eyes.

I'll say it again. I should have noticed when I woke up. I should have been able to.

I had slept over at Haruka's house for the first time in a while and woke up. At the dining table where I was urged to sit down for breakfast, Haruka was in a strangely good mood.

It was also strange that Yuki, who had already left when I woke up, had taken Raquel with her.

During homeroom before the start of classes, a new student stood beside the homeroom teacher who had come to the class.

She was a small girl wearing the same Shinkawahama First High School uniform as us, with hair as beautiful as gold that made you want to stare at it. Her large, upturned eyes were also golden, and her translucent white skin gave her a mysterious aura.

The name written on the whiteboard at the front of the classroom was 'Raquel Alucard'.

There, as a new classmate, was none other than the Raquel I knew.

Hiding deep in the library, crouched behind a bookshelf filled with texts on religion and psychology, I kept my head down.

It was now the middle of the first class of the afternoon. The subject was earth science, but since the teacher in charge, Isa, was absent, my class was instructed to study on our own in the library.

That said, only a handful of students were actually reading textbooks on Earth Science. Most of the students spread out manga and hobby books that had nothing to do with earth science on their desks and chatted with their friends without even looking at them.

However, being in the library, they seemed hesitant to raise their voices too much. The sound of chatter was muted, as if everyone were trying to maintain a semblance of decorum in this space. The voices were all low and muffled, blending together into a constant murmur.

Listening to the voices of his classmates over the bookshelves, Naoto sighed weakly. He was depressed. He was tired. Mentally. The cause was the blonde transfer student, Raquel, who was right beside him.

She herself said that she had only been alive for two years and four days... or maybe five. With such a meager life experience, and the fact that she had never worn clothes before, it was no wonder that she was so unconventional.

And yet, it was unthinkable that she would suddenly enroll in high school without causing any problems.

During class, she would bring up theories that no one knew about and ask the teacher questions about magical perspectives, and if she was bored, she would try to leave the classroom. She would ask Naoto to prepare tea in the classroom, and then, when she said she was going to change for physical education class, she would start undressing in the classroom.

Naturally, it was Naoto's job to jump in and stop Raquel every time she did something like that. As he did so, people around him began to question their relationship, and Raquel replied that he was her "servant."

In just one day, Naoto had been labeled as the servant of a beautiful blonde girl.



"You've been sighing since a while ago. It's really unsightly, so stop it," Raquel said in that same tone. "Whose fault do you think that is?"

Well, no wonder he was sighing.

Taking a deep breath, this time upward to try and change his mood, Naoto looked up at Raquel, who was staring curiously at the bookshelf in front of him.

"So? What's up?"

As soon as they entered the library, she had asked to speak to him alone. Naoto had chosen this place to avoid prying eyes, as he didn't want to suddenly bring up the topic of vampires in front of his classmates.

Raquel turned around and looked around. It was more like she was searching for a faint sound than checking to see if anyone was listening.

"I can sense remnants of something." Naoto, who had been feeling listless until then, was jolted by the whispered words.

"What do you mean?" He sat up straight and frowned. "Are you saying that there's someone related to the Spinners in this school?"

"Not necessarily. But..." Raquel's golden eyes stared intently at Naoto. "It's certain that there are at least eight people in this school with Drive abilities," Raquel's reply etched deeper wrinkles between Naoto's brows.

"Drive abilities?"

Another unfamiliar term had been thrown at him, and Naoto scratched his head. It sounded familiar. Hadn't Kiirō said something about that?

"Naoto-kun, what kind of 'Drive' do you have?" she had asked.

"So, what is this 'Drive'?"

Raquel looked a little surprised, then put her hand to her mouth and thought for a moment. It was clear that it was a very normal, common word for her. Naoto couldn't help but feel that they lived in completely different worlds.

"A Drive is... 'the embodiment of the power of the soul,'" she said, gently opening her hand as if holding something in her white palm. "It's a special ability that each person possesses, a unique power. It resides in everyone's soul, and anyone has the potential to activate it." As if cradling an empty soul in her palm, Raquel gently curled her fingers.

"It's like... a superpower?"

"Yes, I suppose you could say that," Raquel nodded lightly in response to Naoto's question and lowered her hand.

"A Drive is activated when the soul comes even slightly closer to the Azure. There are mainly two triggers for this. One is when a soul that is stronger than usual is drawn to the Azure. Occasionally, there are those with exceptionally strong souls in this world. Such souls tend to be drawn to the Azure much more easily than others. Therefore, those with strong souls tend to be more likely to activate their Drives."

"Of course, there are cases where people with strong souls don't activate their Drives, and conversely, there are cases where people with ordinary souls awaken to their Drives due to some accident. Those 'Immortal Breakers... Valkenhayn Helsing and Relius Clover fit this description. Their souls are incredibly strong."

"And the other one?"

"The other way is to bring oneself closer to the Azure. Spinner Superior did just that. Through his pursuit of magic, he drew his soul nearer to the Azure, activating his Drive ability."

"Is that even possible...? We don't even know where the Azure is, do we?" Approaching a soul to something as uncertain and invisible as the Azure was a world away from Naoto's imagination. As if understanding Naoto, Raquel nodded once more.

"Normally, it's impossible. And the magical society that Spinner used to belong to forbids approaching the Azure. ...In other words, the fact that he was able to do it means he's anything but ordinary."

Not ordinary. Abnormal. Was it referring to his skills or his sinful desires? Naoto, who didn't know Spinner, and Raquel didn't know either.

"The closer a soul gets to the Azure, the more powerful the Drive becomes. That said, even Valkenhayn and Relius haven't even come close to a glimpse of it. If you could get close to a fragment of the Azure, the power you would possess wouldn't be something as simple as that." Naoto sensed from Raquel's words just how vast and distant the Azure was.

At the same time, he felt a bit of despair. Spinner, who was aware of the existence of the Azure to such an extent that he could approach it himself, had yet to obtain it, and even Valkenhain and Relius were far too distant from its existence. How could someone like him possibly obtain something like that?

(I can't see a bright future...)

He didn't want to find out if he couldn't, but the more he understood, the more dazzling the situation seemed.

"So, are you and your father Drive users too? Because your souls have approached the Azure or something?" When Naoto asked out of curiosity, Raquel shook her head slightly, her expression slightly strained.

"My father is a bit different. He's a very special existence... a special case among special cases, an exception among exceptions." She repeated the words as if to convey how extraordinary and unusual it was. Unconsciously, she hugged her other arm with her hand. It looked a bit like a frightened gesture. "I don't know who it was, but a long time ago, there was someone in the world who was the only one to touch a fragment of the Azure. My father was created by that person using the power of the Azure."

"That sounds... incredibly amazing, doesn't it?"

Although he couldn't say that he fully understood everything so far, he thought so even with his limited knowledge. Raquel looked at Naoto with a stern gaze as he hesitantly raised his hand and spoke. What lay in her gaze was not anger, but awe—specifically towards her own father.

"It's incredibly amazing. He's fundamentally on a different level from other living beings. He's a 'Fantasy Creature' born from the Azure, from human desires, resentment, and awe."

These are beings that are closer to the Azure than any other creature, transcending all others by nature. If the manifestation of the power of the soul is the Drive, then Clavis could be seen as the manifestation of various aberrations born from many souls. The existence itself is the Drive.

But if Clavis is such a formidable existence, then a question arises for Naoto.

"Isn't Raquel a 'Fantasy Creature' too?"

Raquel is also a vampire, just like Clavis. But Raquel lowered her gaze weakly.

"No. I was created by my father, who is a 'Fantasy Creature'. I'm probably closer to the Valkenhayns, a race created magically by humans."

The Valkenhayns are werewolves. But Raquel says that they are not a race that has grown up in the natural order of things, but one that has been created intentionally by powerful beings.

"That's why I'm a Drive user, just like Valkenhayn and Relius. My ability is called 'Wind User'. My soul is skilled at manipulating the wind." Leaning against the bookshelf with her small back, Raquel reached out towards the front. A gentle breeze swirled at her outstretched fingertips. Carrying the scent of dust sucked up by the books, the wind passed in front of Naoto and disappeared somewhere.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" Looking sideways at the wind, Naoto asked softly.

"Is my eye... a Drive?" Raquel already knew about the 'Hunter's Eye' that could see people's life force as numbers. He had always wondered why he could see these numbers. What was the

reason and meaning behind it? Naoto looked at Raquel. Above her head, as usual, was an extraordinary eight-digit number.

".....I don't know," she said, hesitating for a moment, furrowing her brow. She moved away from the bookshelf and crouched in front of Naoto. She put her hands on the floor and leaned forward as if to bring her face closer.

"W-wait...?" The distance between them suddenly closed, and Raquel's large eyes and well-shaped nose were right in front of Naoto's. He involuntarily held his breath. Even so, he couldn't completely stifle his breath, and it slipped out, brushing against Raquel's bangs. Her hair had a beautiful color, entirely unlike anything Naoto had seen in his daily life, and her piercing gaze stirred something in his chest.

If she got any closer, their breaths would almost touch... Raquel made a difficult face again.

"I can't feel its power unless I get this close. I think that this power wasn't originally in your soul, but was transplanted from somewhere else."

With a sigh of exasperation, Raquel stood up abruptly. As if she had gotten dust on her, she lightly brushed her hand.

Naoto felt a bit deflated. He leaned his head against the bookshelf behind him with a thud and shook his shoulders at the involuntary smile that welled up. He didn't want to be surprised.

It was as if Raquel's presence still lingered right in front of his nose.

"Transplant... is it?" With a wry smile, Naoto looked up at the ceiling. He had mixed feelings about Raquel's words. But... that didn't matter right now. Naoto turned to Raquel and changed the subject. "So, there are eight Drive users, right? Is that... a bad thing?"

They were after Spinner. Spinner was also a Drive user, but it was hard to believe that he was in school.

Raquel looked at him with a bored expression. Her eyes, which seemed to say, "Can't you even figure that out?", were filled with a haughtiness that was so typical of her.

"Using a Drive means using a tiny bit of the power of the Azure. That burnt residue is the remnant of the Azure. ...I said earlier that I felt the remnant of the Azure in the school, didn't I?" Raquel's words at the end of her sentence urged him to answer.

Was she telling him to think instead of just listening? It was impossible for him to come up with anything when he didn't even know about the existence of Drives. Muttering curses under his breath, Naoto rested his elbow on his knee and propped his cheek on his hand.

"So, it means someone used a Drive?"

"Or they're closely associated with someone who used a Drive..."

In other words, there might be someone who had something to do with Spinner or Spinner's followers.

Raquel's gaze was unwavering. For a makeshift strategy meeting in the back of a high school library, it was a bit too serious.

"Either way, I want to investigate those eight people. Because as long as they have Drives, we don't know when they might become a hindrance."

"A hindrance?"

"Those who have activated their Drives naturally begin to feel the power of the Azure and gradually begin to seek it out. If that happens, they could become our enemies." Both Raquel and Naoto were seeking the Azure. Spinner was also seeking the same thing. It meant that there was a possibility that another person would get involved.

(If that happens, it'll be a complete mess...)

He wanted to avoid such a situation if possible. If it was a preparation for that, then Raquel's proposal to investigate was something Naoto could work with.

"Alright. Let's do that investigation then. What should I do?" With a small cheer, Naoto stood up. He glanced at the classmates in the bookshelves behind him.

"Maybe there are other Drive users there too." The thought made the familiar scenery seem to change color, and Naoto felt uneasy.

Raquel folded her arms. Her thoughtful golden eyes fixed on Naoto.

"Lead the way. We need a spot near the center of the school that's out of sight."

"Got it." He had just the place in mind. Running his fingers through his hair, Naoto led Raquel back into the light. For now, he had to get through the classes without drawing attention until after school.

Worrying about whether Raquel would stand out, Naoto randomly pulled out a book he had no interest in. It looked like it would serve as a decent pillow for a nap until class ended.

Shinkawahama First High School had a rough "H" shape, with the main school building in the center surrounded by gymnasiums and special classrooms on either side. In front of the main school building, there was an open approach with flower beds and benches, and a large ground spread out in front of that. Since the entrances to both the gymnasium and the special classroom building faced the ground, students mainly used the front side of the main school building for their school life.

Conversely, the back of the school building had little sunlight and was in the shade all day, making it not a very popular spot. However, it was a favorite place for students who preferred quiet and secluded places, although the number of users was limited.

It was the first place that came to Naoto's mind when Raquel asked for a place near the center of the school but out of sight.

He went around from the special classroom building and entered the shadow of the protruding part of the stairs. It wasn't completely out of sight, but for now, there was no one around, so it was enough.

After looking around, he stepped back to make room for Raquel, who had followed him. Raquel crouched down and began to draw the same magic circle she had drawn in the unmanned apartment complex before. As her fingertips glided across the ground, red blood-like letters unfolded at her feet.

Staring at it, Naoto realized that he was no longer as shocked as he would have been before by this sight.

(Humans really are adaptable creatures...) He mused to himself while keeping an eye out for anyone approaching. Just a few days ago, magic had been a word that existed only in fairy tales and games for Naoto. Yet now, he no longer questioned Raquel using magic.

Raquel quickly finished drawing the magic circle and stood in the center, spreading her arms and closing her eyes. It was slightly smaller than the one she used in the deserted housing complex, probably because she only needed to search within the school grounds.

The wind gathered around Raquel. At first, it was weak and thin, but gradually it grew larger and softer, enveloping Raquel and gently lifting her small body. Her long hair, still tied back, swayed gracefully in the wind along with the large ribbon. Her pleated skirt fluttered lightly, blown by the wind. Then, Naoto saw it...

It's her arms. It was only for a moment, but Naoto's eyes caught it.

A well-toned, small, white, round butt.

"W-wait a minute, Raquel!?"

Swallowing a strangled scream that was about to escape, Naoto rushed to Raquel, grabbed her shoulder, and pulled her floating body back to the ground. Instantly, the wind stopped as if a string had been cut.

"What are you doing? I'm concentrating. Don't interrupt me." Raquel shot him a disgruntled glare, clearly annoyed. But for Naoto, there was no time for that.

"Why... why aren't you wearing anything...?!" He almost yelled, but quickly suppressed his voice, speaking in an urgent whisper. His grip tightened on her shoulders.

Raquel tilted her head, looking puzzled. "Wearing? What?"

"I mean! I mean... Why are you not wearing anything under your skirt? Underwear, pants, why...?"

"Oh, well, they feel uncomfortable."

"No, no, no! What are you saying? That's way worse than being completely naked!" Naoto's gaze involuntarily fell on Raquel's skirt. As he reached out to touch her skirt, Raquel spoke as if she were dealing with a fussy child.

"Isn't it fine if it can't be seen?"

"No, it's not! Ugh, don't lift it up!"

"How silly. Human society is so complicated."

"You're the complicated one!" Naoto swatted her hand away as she tried to lift the hem of her skirt, finally expressing his frustration.

Raquel glanced at him as if he were something strange, then turned back to the magic circle. "Anyway, don't interrupt me. I'm starting." Once again, Raquel lightly spread her arms and focused her mind. As if responding to her call, the wind that had once dispersed began to gather again.

Naoto quickly turned his back to Raquel. A moment ago, he had only caught a glimpse of the roundness of her buttocks, which was bad enough but not entirely terrible. If he had seen her completely exposed, he felt like he would have died. Not at the hands of anyone in particular, but rather at the hands of the concept of morality itself.

Behind him, he could hear Raquel muttering incomprehensibly. A sound like the wind blowing through a tunnel was faintly audible, followed by a deep light that was neither red nor pink, rushing past Naoto's feet.

The light spread throughout the school in an instant and disappeared as quickly as the wind had passed. Waiting for the wind behind him to stop, Naoto turned around just in time to see the magic circle at Raquel's feet dissipating like flower petals scattered by the wind.

Raquel, who had performed the ritual, let out a soft breath, looking beautiful amidst the rising and disappearing petals of light. For a moment, Naoto was captivated, but then he shook his head, realizing that this was not the time for such things.

"How was it?" he asked Raquel, who was emerging from the spot where the magic circle had been, his voice slightly mocking. Raquel came up to Naoto, smoothing her slightly disheveled

bangs with her fingers. "I've found a few people. But all the drives I could sense were immature and weak, so they shouldn't pose a threat anytime soon."

"I see. That's good." Relieved by Raquel's casual tone, Naoto sighed. He didn't want a situation where Drive users were causing trouble in a school that Haruka and Shinnosuke also attended.

"However... there is one person who interests me," Raquel said, crossing her arms and her voice darkening ominously. Naoto frowned in response.

"Someone who interests you? Who is it?"

"I don't know. Their power is very weak, and they're certainly not a combat-ready Drive user. But there's something... that bothers me. I think I'll know more if I get closer."

The magic that had scanned the entire school at once to sense the Drive users within could not investigate detailed information about each individual. Naoto looked up at the school building where Raquel's magic had just passed through.

"Let's try to find that person. If possible, let's find them before they leave school..."

"O-oh, Naoto!" Shinnosuke's cheerful voice interrupted Naoto. Turning around, Naoto saw Shinnosuke running towards them from the middle of the corridor connecting the main school building to the special classroom building, waving his hand vigorously.

"Oh, it's Raquel, the transfer student. What's with you, first Hayami and now Raquel? What a ladies' man you are!"

"I told you to stop calling me that..." Naoto glared at Shinnosuke, who grinned mischievously and nudged him in the ribs. But of course, Shinnosuke, who was used to Naoto's expressions, didn't care and...

Shinnosuke sidled up to Naoto, grinning. "Don't get too lovey-dovey at school, okay? Oh, I know, I have a game where you can have lovey-dovey moments with a hundred and eight different sisters. Should I bring it over?"

"What kind of Suikoden game is this? The main character's dad is awesome!"

"Dating sim... lovey-dovey?"

"Never mind, Raquel-san, don't worry about it!" Naoto let out a sigh of exhaustion, shouting at his mischievous friend while making a desperate plea to the bewildered Raquel. Whenever Shinnosuke was around, the atmosphere would always lighten up, no matter how serious things had been. That was both his greatest strength and his weakness.

A third person, with a more composed gait, approached the group that had been so disrupted.

With her long black hair flowing in the cool evening breeze, she was a tall, slender female student. Despite her casual posture, she exuded a regal aura, and even her slightest movements seemed to draw one in.

Almost everyone at Shinkawahama High School knew who she was.

Kirishima Kana.

A year older than Naoto and Shinnosuke, she was the vice president of the student council. She was also the daughter of a major company president, and her perfect combination of wealth, beauty, academic excellence, and artistic talent had earned her the nickname "Queen".

"Excuse me for interrupting. Fukuda-kun, can I have a word?" She gave a considerate glance at Naoto and Raquel before turning her slit-eyed gaze to Shinnosuke.

It was intimidating, to say the least.

Shinnosuke's broad shoulders jumped at the unexpected summons from the queen.

"Y-yes! What is it?"

Kana gave a small, amused smile at Shinnosuke's almost military-like response and handed him a stack of papers.

"It's about the committee..."

As it happened, Shinnosuke was a member of the beautification committee. With the cultural festival approaching as autumn deepened, various committees were becoming increasingly busy before other students.

"Oh, I see. Sorry, I'll take care of it right away!" As if there had been some kind of trouble, Shinnosuke bowed his head while looking at the stack of papers he had been handed.

"Sorry, Naoto. I have to go!"

"Alright, see you later!"

It seemed to be an urgent matter, and with a quick wave of the hand holding the papers, Shinnosuke hurried back to the school building. Watching him go, Naoto was secretly impressed that Shinnosuke could put on such a serious face.

As soon as Shinnosuke was out of sight, Kana, who had seemed about to leave, turned back to Naoto, running her fingers through her long hair.

"Hello. Are you Kurogane Naoto?"

"Yes, I am, but..."

Kana's deep black eyes gazed coolly at Naoto. Returning her gaze, Naoto tilted his head slightly. Kirishima Kana was a famous person in the school, and even Naoto knew her name. But Naoto was by no means a conspicuous student, and he had never interacted with Kana before. So why did she know his name?

(Am I getting recognized by strangers too often lately?)

Naoto's question was clearly evident on his face, and Kana chuckled softly, giving him a brief smile.

"Haruka often tells me about you."

That made sense. Naoto mentally clapped his hands.

(Oh, I see. Haruka is also a student council member...)

Because of their completely different atmospheres, he hadn't been able to imagine the two of them working together on the student council.

Running her fingers through her straight hair like a Japanese doll, Kana tilted her head slightly and looked at Naoto with a probing gaze.

"Haruka is your girlfriend, isn't she?"

"Huh?"

It was a sudden question. Not knowing why she was asking, Naoto shook his head.

"No, I don't think so."

"Hmm, I see." Kana replied indifferently, neither surprised nor suspicious, and then scanned Naoto with her gaze. It felt like he was being observed. Her eyes made him feel uneasy.

He had been scrutinized by Kiiru in a similar way, but he felt that Kana's gaze was different.

To make an unintentional comparison, Kiiru's gaze was a masochistic one that incited his aggression, while Kana's gaze was a sadistic one that provoked a defensive reaction in him. It was a quiet, intimidating presence that seemed to crush his resistance and naturally arouse him.

"What do you think of Haruka?" Kana smiled thinly, raising one corner of her lip.

It felt like an interrogation. Perhaps it was because of the sharpness in the deep eyes of this beautiful vice president, whether it was intentional or not. It was a look that seemed to say, 'I don't suppose you intend to answer back?'

"What do I think... well, we're childhood friends."

"That's all?"

"Well, I guess you could say that's all. I think of her like family." Naoto replied bluntly. He felt a bit annoyed at himself for answering so readily as he was asked.

"I see. Family... huh." He wondered what she meant by that. Kana murmured softly, along with a shallow breath.

She gathered her long hair and tucked it behind her ear.

"I'm sorry for suddenly calling out to you. I just wanted to talk to you for a bit. Well, excuse me." Leaving a smile and a glance as a farewell, Kana flipped her long black hair and walked away from Naoto with a brisk gait.

Even her back, as she walked the short distance to the school building, exuded a sense of elegance that only a teenage girl could possess. Given her daily demeanor, it was no wonder that her name was so well-known.

What he couldn't understand was why that queen would talk to someone like Naoto. He didn't doubt that she genuinely wanted to talk, but was that all there was to it?

(I don't know what she's thinking.)

If you wanted to put a positive spin on it, you could say she was a mysterious woman who lived up to her appearance, but if you were being negative, you could say she was untrustworthy, as if she had something up her sleeve.

"Huh? Raquel?"

He realized that while Kana had spoken to him, she hadn't said a word to Raquel. Wondering what was going on, he looked around, and there she was, stuck right behind Naoto, hiding herself as small as possible.

"Hey, social awkwardness. What are you doing?"

"I-I'm not doing anything! I'm definitely not hiding because I didn't want that girl to talk to me!"

(So that's what it was...)

Naoto couldn't help but admire her spirit, even as she gripped his uniform with both hands, her face pale and eyes wide with tension.

"More importantly, Naoto. Just now... just now..."

"Just now? Senior Kirishima?"

"Yes! That girl..." Raquel peered cautiously from behind Naoto, trying to catch a glimpse of Kana, who had already disappeared behind the school building. Once she realized this, Raquel quickly regained her composure and stepped out from behind Naoto.

She turned around and looked up at Naoto with a defiant look, as if to deny that she had been hiding. But despite this playful demeanor, the words Raquel spoke shocked Naoto.

"I sensed the same Azure residue from her as Spinner Superior."

"What?" Naoto looked up, startled. He hadn't expected that at all. A feeling of anxiety, like a slow burn, formed at his temples. That meant Kana had come into contact with Spinner in some way.

Kana had already left. He couldn't imagine how a senior who seemed so perfect and flawless could have come into contact with Spinner.

But with this new revelation, it made him question whether her earlier interactions—first with Shinnosuke and then with him—were merely coincidental or something more suspicious.

—

A light brown dining table was set with a placemat embroidered with vegetables, and a colorful dinner was laid out on it.

Tonight's menu was hamburgers. An oval-shaped hamburger with a lightly browned crust was topped with homemade sauce, and it was served with warm vegetables like potatoes and carrots.

In addition, there was corn cream soup in a soup mug, a small bowl of marinated mushrooms, and a Caesar salad in the center of the table, all of which were Western-style dishes.

It was a menu that Haruka had prepared for Raquel, who had only recently come to Japan. Haruka usually cooked Japanese food, but even her occasional Western dishes were undeniably delicious. Impressed, Naoto sat down at the Sawaki household's dinner table and began to eat with gusto.

It was a peaceful and warm moment, thanks to Haruka.

"Speaking of which, Haruka, weren't you a student council member?" As he stabbed his fork into the hamburger and cut it into bite-sized pieces, Naoto asked, remembering something. The hamburger, filled with sautéed onions, was soft and easy to cut. The meat juice that oozed out mixed with the sauce on the plate.

Haruka, who had been drinking from her soup mug, nodded. "Yeah, why?"

"What's Kirishima-senpai like?"

"Eh!?" As soon as he asked, Haruka jumped in surprise. She almost spilled her soup and quickly put her hand over her mouth as she put the cup back on the table.

"Wh-what do you mean, what's she like? Why are you so surprised?"

"Why are you so flustered? Did I say something wrong?"

"N-no, not at all! It's just, I was a little surprised. You know, it's rare for you, Nao-kun, to be interested in a girl..."

"Why are you raising your voice?"

And her eyes were darting around. Naoto scratched his head with the fork he was still holding, tilting his head.

"I just happened to meet her today. She's the vice president, right? But I didn't know her at all. I was just wondering what she was like."

"Oh, I see... um..." Having calmed down, Haruka looked up at the ceiling and thought for a moment. "She's strict, but she's a good person. She's beautiful, and everyone looks up to her." Haruka must have been included in that 'everyone'. Her tone was soft, and there was a hint of pride in her voice.

"Hmm. A popular vice president. She's so accomplished."

"But I don't think she's very interested in younger guys, is she? Yeah, I don't think so. Definitely not."

"Yeah?"

"Well... I'm not really interested in stuff like that anyway."

In fact, when it comes to a person's kindness, preferences for older or younger people shouldn't matter.

Haruka gave a nervous laugh, as if trying to avoid the subject, and placed her hamburger on top of the rice in her bowl.

Doing the same, Naoto opened his mouth again. "Do you know anything else about her?"

"She's from a wealthy family, she's academically excellent... I don't know much else besides what everyone already knows. I only talk to her about student council stuff, and she doesn't seem like the type to talk about her personal life."

"I see." Nodding in agreement, Naoto stuffed a mouthful of hamburger and rice. He thought it was quite like Kana to keep her private life to herself. He didn't know much about her

personality, but based on her appearance, it seemed fitting. Just then, Raquel, who had been quietly eating while listening to their conversation, put down her fork and knife.

"Isn't she involved in magic?"

"Magic?" Haruka looked puzzled at the sharp question, and Naoto was startled.

(Wait a minute...)

He was about to retort, "Why are you asking so directly?", but he managed to swallow his words at the last moment. It would only make Raquel's question sound more meaningful.

Fortunately, Haruka came to his rescue.

"Magic, like tarot cards or black magic? Things like that?"

"Y-yeah, exactly!" Tarot was a safe enough word. Naoto jumped on Haruka's remark. He silenced Raquel with a look and a brief gesture, trying to stop her from correcting him. Seeing their exchange, Haruka smiled amusedly.

"I don't know. I've never heard of it, but since Senior Kirishima has a bit of a mysterious air about her, she might be into tarot cards."

"Yeah, I think she could do fortune-telling." He tried to imagine it, and it was so fitting that it was almost creepy. Even if she couldn't actually do fortune-telling, if she looked at you with those piercing eyes and that appearance, she could probably make you believe any future she described.

(Well... in that sense, Raquel might be even better.)

Raquel was more mystical than mysterious. Her eyes, which felt like they were exposing everything, made you feel like she could predict the future rather than just tell it.

Naoto thought about how the weight of those words might be felt. Chewing on his salad, he glanced over at Raquel, who was holding her mug with both hands, trying hard to blow on its contents to cool it down.

(Not that it matters.)

At least while they were sitting at the table together, she was like an awkward kitten.

"Oh, by the way, I've heard something about Kirishima-senpai!" Haruka suddenly raised her hand to the level of her face, as if she were in class. Naoto nodded, encouraging her to continue. "There's this alleyway behind the station. Someone saw her going in there. And it's been happening a lot lately."

"An alleyway... you mean the one with that really old arcade?"

"I'm not sure about the exact location of the game center. It's a bit dark and scary at night, and there are shady people hanging around. It's deep inside that alley. It's not a place where someone like Kirishima-senpai would go, is it?"

Naoto hummed in thought. From what Haruka had said, it was probably near the alleyway where he had been attacked by Valkenhayn.

"Thanks. That's helpful."

"Anytime." Haruka shrugged slightly, sounding a little bitter. She didn't seem to think she had provided very useful information.

But for Naoto, it was much more helpful than knowing her birthday or hobbies. Naoto glanced at Raquel. She seemed to have been listening to Haruka's information as well, and her golden eyes were serious as she nodded slightly. He needed to investigate as soon as possible.

"...What's wrong, Haruka? Did you get some sauce on you?" As he reached for his chopsticks to focus on his meal again, Naoto noticed that Haruka had put down her chopsticks and was fiddling with her hair. Snapped back to reality by Naoto's comment, Haruka let go of her hair.

"No, it's just... I was wondering if you like girls with long black hair, Nao."

"What? Where did that come from?"

"It's not sudden at all... no, nothing. Don't mind me!" Laughing it off, Haruka picked up her chopsticks again and put a piece of marinated mushroom in her mouth. It was a side dish that went surprisingly well with rice, with a strong flavor of garlic and olive oil.

While eating some of the mushrooms, Naoto glanced at Haruka's hair. Her bright brown hair, not dyed but slightly wavy and soft, reminded him a lot of Yuki. In moments like this, he could feel the strong familial resemblance.

(Long black hair, huh? Is she thinking of getting a hairstyle like Kirishima-senpai's...?)

That kind of hair texture seems like it would be a strong point of admiration among girls. However, even imagining it, Haruka with a hairstyle like Kirishima-senpai's just didn't seem right.

"It's fine as it is. I actually prefer the vibe you have now, Haruka. It's more composed."

"Really!?"

"Yeah."

Haruka leaned forward, slapping both hands on the table, and Naoto nodded, slightly taken aback. Was it really such a surprise? He didn't think there was anyone around Haruka, including himself, who thought she should change her hairstyle.

“Come on, eat up! You don’t want it to get cold! There’s a second helping of soup too!”

With her cheeks completely relaxed in an overwhelmingly happy smile, Haruka encouraged Naoto and Raquel to eat. Naoto, a bit bewildered by her exuberance, decided to ask for a second helping of the soup. Her unusually high “Yes!” response made him tilt his head in confusion. What was going on?

Above Haruka’s head, the number “8” seemed to bounce up.

She walked through the dimly lit alley, making herself as small as possible, wary of the surrounding eyes. The time was approaching dinner, and the area was... The neighborhood, lined with old apartment buildings and office buildings, was completely shrouded in darkness, despite the fact that there was a residential area nearby. Several of the streetlights that should have illuminated the night path were left broken and unmaintained, far from their intended brightness.

Carrying a large Boston bag that seemed to hold something she wished to hide, she walked through the darkness and finally stopped in front of a single apartment building. It was an old, eerie-looking apartment building that blended into the surrounding darkness. Perhaps it would have looked a little better in the bright sunlight, but when looking up at night, the dirt caked on the exterior walls gave it a dirty impression, and its gloom seemed to weigh down on her.

None of the rooms were lit, making it look abandoned. But there was still a resident, and that resident was the reason she was here. With her lips tightly pursed, she entered the apartment building.

'She' was still a girl. She was wearing a red coat that was a bit early for the season, and with her hood pulled deep over her eyes, her body shape and facial features were not clearly visible, but she was still a high school student. The legs that extended from the hem of her coat were long and slender, and the fine texture of the skin visible around her knees suggested a well-proportioned figure. Glossy black hair peeked out from under her deep hood.

She climbed the stairs in her black loafers. The apartment building had an elevator, but she knew it was broken and unusable.

Slowly and carefully, she climbed the stairs, trying not to make a sound. She reached the fifth floor, the top floor of the apartment building. She stopped in front of one of the rooms and hugged the Boston bag she was carrying tightly. Only one room had a faint light coming from under the door. It was where the only resident lived.

The girl pressed the doorbell with a trembling hand. The broken, raspy sound was distorted and unpleasant, perfectly suited to the eerie apartment building. After a brief silence, a small sound of a key turning could be heard, followed by the creaking sound of a door opening.

A man greeted the girl. He was of medium height with a sturdy build, wearing a worn-out shirt and worn-out chino pants. He had a square-framed pair of black glasses on his sagging face. He did not have a friendly, gentle face. Rather, he had a stern expression that seemed to severely criticize others, but as soon as he saw the girl, he smiled wryly.

"You're late... Kana-kun."

"... Mr. Isa. I'm sorry, I was late because of the student council." The man who greeted her was Tadayuki Isa, a geophysics teacher at Shinkawahama First High School. The female high school student who had come was Kana Kirishima.

Peeking out of the half-open door to check the outside, Isa stepped aside and motioned for Kana to enter.

"Come in."

Without resisting, Kana slipped into Isa's room. The room was a chaotic mess, and it didn't look like the room of a man who was supposed to be educating students. It was filled with a suffocating atmosphere of neglect. Standing there, waiting for the door to close, Kana, with her coat hood cautiously removed, presented a morally ambiguous contrast.

"I was surprised when you called me so suddenly..." Holding the Boston bag to her chest, Kana looked at Isa inquiringly. There was none of the sharp, intimidating look that she had when she stared at Naoto and Shinnosuke at school.

"You were the one who said I could come anytime, weren't you?" Isa turned around, his face slack with lasciviousness, and closed the door. The sound of the lock clicking shut echoed heavily.

Kana bowed her head at Isa's words. Isa reached out and touched the shoulder of her red coat, leading her into the depths of the room. There was no hesitation in Isa, and no hesitation in Kana. The room had the smell of lazy familiarity.

"So, are you ready?" Isa's voice asked lecherously. Kana clenched the Boston bag she was holding, her fingers digging into it. She averted her gaze from Isa and lowered her chin gracefully.

"If I go buy it... someone might see me, and that would be a problem." Her voice was weak and thin, as if she were asking for permission. Her weakness only added to the perversity of Isa's voice.

"I can prepare it here, but... then the 'size' will be up to me. Is that okay with you?" With a knowing smirk, he taunted her, delighting in the humiliation that would follow. Kana bowed her head deeply. A hand with square nails ran along her shoulder like a snake. "Besides, isn't it you, Kana, who would quickly make it 'unusable'?"

His voice, smooth and seductive, sent shivers down her spine. She squeezed her eyes shut, but it was no use. His lips were almost touching her ear. "Now, about Hayami-kun..." A hand rested on her shoulder, but Kana quickly swatted it away.

"P-Please don't talk about Haruka right now!" With a sudden outburst that belied her previous meekness, Kana shook off the hand on her shoulder and pleaded accusingly. Her eyes immediately flinched. "Ah... I-I'm sorry, sensei. But I..."

"No, it was my fault. This was supposed to be our time together." Again, Isa placed both of his hands on Kana's shoulders, as if to confine and capture her in his grasp. "And it's not 'sensei'. You know how to address me when it's just the two of us."

"Y-yes." Kana lowered her head, her expression glistening with suppressed shame. Her face, different from usual, seemed to entice the man. Isa's hand slid down Kana's shoulder, unbuttoning her jacket one by one. Once all of the buttons were undone, Kana took the coat off. She folded it and placed it in the corner of the room. While watching Kana turn back around, Isa reached for Ko's clothes.

"Well then... let's begin." As Isa spoke in a husky voice, his words tainted by lust, a strange, insect-like sound seemed to writhe from deep within his throat.

—

It was a cloudy day. After school, with the sky obscured by thin, grayish clouds, Naoto staked out a bench beside the special classroom building and sipped on a packet of coffee milk he'd bought from the school store for eighty yen.

Today, Naoto and Raquel had spent the entire day walking around the school, gathering information about a person named "Kana Kirishima."

Though the "information" mostly involved catching people who had some degree of interaction with her and asking them various questions. The conclusions drawn from this were as follows:

"A strict but kind woman," "a true young lady," "wealthy," "beautiful," and "Her breasts are bigger than you would expect from her clothes"- Except for that last item, Naoto had only spoken to her once.

Even Naoto knew that, and he had already guessed that even from looking at her clothes, Kana's breasts were above average. While the idea that they were even larger than that was intriguing, it was definitely unrelated to the current situation. In other words...

"No luck."

The investigation was a complete waste of time.

"Haruka said that she doesn't show her private side much at school. Is that the case for everyone?" Raquel said, not seeming too disheartened, leaning beside Naoto and drinking a strawberry milk from the same eighty-yen pack series. She must be used to dealing with cases where there are no clues. Or perhaps half her mind was on the contents of the paper pack she was gently holding in both hands.

"Nah. Not everything can be completely open, but it's rare to meet someone who's so completely guarded, isn't it?" Even if someone tries to hide it, a little bit of their personality or private life can slip out. But Kana Kirishima doesn't have that. Naoto thought maybe she was so perfect that she was consciously trying to hide everything perfectly.

Naoto leaned back against the bench and looked up at the sky. The weather wasn't clear. It didn't seem like it would rain, but would it clear up a little at night? Thinking about that, he suddenly looked at Raquel next to him and remembered.

"Hey... are you... wearing them today?"

"What?" Her pure, innocent expression and voice indicated that she genuinely didn't understand what he was referring to. Naoto understood just from that.

(She's not wearing them...)

His eyes went to Raquel's bare knees. And then he caught himself imagining what was under her skirt, and scolded himself for doing so, shaking his head vigorously. Before him, the tip of a black loafer advanced.

"Hello, Kurogane Naoto-kun." He looked up at the voice. There, standing before him, was Kana Kirishima.

"H-hello." His heart raced. Had word gotten around about him asking questions about her? But Kana didn't seem to be offended at all. Instead, she gave a faint smile.

"We ran into each other around here yesterday, didn't we? Do you come here often?"

"Uh, not really, it's just a coincidence... What about you, senpai?"

"I just finished some business over there." She said, and looked at the special classroom building behind Naoto. Many clubs use the special classrooms as clubrooms. Looking away into the distance, Naoto furrowed his brow for a moment.

"9006"—the number above Kana's head. It was low. Not as low as Isa's was the other day, but she must be tired. Now that he thought about it, the number he had seen yesterday was also much lower than average.

"Is something wrong?"

"Oh, no." He realized that she had caught him staring. Naoto quickly shifted his gaze from her number back to her face. He didn't want to give the impression of being a man who only stared at people's heads.

"I just thought you were beautiful, senpai."

Kana laughed it off coolly. "If you keep saying things like that, Haruka might get jealous, you know?"

"She's not like that."

As he dodged the question, Naoto felt a bitterness in his throat. Haruka again. He felt like Kana was strangely concerned about Haruka. If she was originally the kind of person who cared about others like this, he thought he would have gotten a slightly different impression from the information he gathered.

Just as he was thinking that, Raquel, who had been observing Kana with a wary aura, stood up.

"Kana Kirishima. Do you know a man named Spinner Superior?" She threw out her usual straightforward question without hesitation.

A mysterious blonde beauty and a black-haired girl exuding an air of mystery—together, they were quite a sight. But now was not the time to think about such things.

(What the hell is she talking about all of a sudden?)

Naoto's eyes darted back and forth, flustered and not knowing how to stop her, while Kana simply tilted her head in confusion. He could hear the sound of her long hair slipping smoothly past his shoulder.

"Spinner... what?" It was clear she had never heard that name before. Probably because she was being stared at, Raquel's body tensed visibly, and she looked away as if to escape. She opened her mouth again.

"Spinner Superior." Her voice lacked any conviction, almost as if it was a pity to hear her say it. She had only recently become able to endure being in the same space as Haruka. And with someone like Kana, who she was meeting for only the second time, the damage would be even greater.

Mistaking Raquel's lowered gaze for shyness, Kana leaned in with an expression as if she were looking at something adorable. She bent slightly, searching for Raquel's small gaze. They locked eyes. Raquel flinched slightly.

"I'm sorry. I don't know. Is he a foreign actor?"

"I-I see... If you don't know, that's fine..." Facing Kana's relaxed demeanor, Raquel no longer had the strength to argue back.

"You're Raquel Alcard, right? I heard you're staying at Haruka's house." Kana straightened her previously hunched posture and directed her question at Naoto. Her flawless smile was as if...

It was as if she wanted to say, "It's sad to tease her any further."

(Raquel... she's completely outmatched.)

Naoto chuckled inwardly, seeing how severe Raquel's dislike of other girls was. He turned to Kana.

"Do you know her?"

"I'm the vice president of the student council, after all. And she's already quite famous throughout the school. They say there's a very beautiful foreign exchange student. The boys in my class were all excited about it."

"Really? I didn't know that."

It's not a surprising story, though. If Naoto were an outsider, he would have been surprised by Raquel's transfer too, and he probably would have turned around if he passed her in the hallway. If he didn't know her foolish nature behind her arrogant facade, he might have imagined her to be a noble and perfect person.

A sudden chime rang out, interrupting their conversation. Naoto remembered his homeroom teacher saying it was a signal for students without any after-school activities to go home early.

"Oh no, it's already this late..." Startled by the chime, Kana checked her watch and her expression clouded over. The relaxed demeanor she had earlier vanished, replaced by a sudden look of urgency.

"Do you have somewhere to be?"

"Yes... I'm so sorry. I have to go, Kurogane-kun, Alucard-san." She really seemed to be in a hurry. With a forced smile on her lips, her expression not exactly bright as if she had an unpleasant task ahead, Kana turned on her heel and quickly headed back to the main school building. Watching her retreating figure, Naoto let out a deep sigh of exasperation.

"Hey, Raquel... if you're going to dig for information, you could at least ask in a better way. What if Kirishima-senpai really is connected to Spinner...?" As he droned on with his scolding, he suddenly noticed Raquel completely frozen in place, her chin lowered and eyes wide open, not moving at all.

(Oh, this is bad.)

Instantly realizing what had happened, Naoto grabbed Raquel's stiff shoulder and shook her vigorously.

"Hey, snap out of it! Breathe, breathe!!"

"Ugh!" Raquel's consciousness returned with the force of a popped balloon. How long had she forgotten to breathe? Her thin chest rose and fell rapidly, her face pale as if she had just experienced something horrifying.

"To... to put pressure on me like this... Kirishima Kana, she's no ordinary person."

"It's your fault!" While quickly retorting, Naoto couldn't help but think, *'So even vampires can have trouble breathing.'*

"Anyway, from the way you reacted just now, it seems like you don't know anything about Spinner." Naoto took another sip of his coffee milk before continuing. If Kana had been a skilled actress, he would have been stumped, but her immediate reaction...

It was definitely not the kind of name that an ordinary person would recognize. Raquel nodded in agreement.

"But today, I can feel a slightly stronger remnant of the Azure than yesterday," she said.

"Is it related to Spinner?"

"Yes." Raquel stated firmly. She must be able to perceive it that clearly. Raquel looked up at Naoto and said strongly, "I'm going to follow her. She might contact someone related to Spinner today."

Or maybe even Spinner himself. Either way, it's certain that Kana is an important clue to getting closer to Spinner. Naoto didn't want Kana to be wandering near such a dangerous person. He wasn't personally close to her, but knowing the risks and doing nothing would sit uncomfortably with him. But Naoto grimaced bitterly and sucked down the rest of his coffee milk. He inhaled some air along with the remaining liquid, making an awkward sound in the pack.

"But, I promised to go shopping with Haruka today..." Crushing the empty paper pack carefully, Naoto sighed in resignation. Although it was a promise, he couldn't put Kana off. While thinking about how to decline, he stood up to head towards the trash can a little further away.

He saw Haruka running from the school building. He was about to wave and call out to her, but then stopped. As they passed each other, Haruka was being called by Kana. It seemed like Kana was apologizing for something, and Haruka was hurriedly agreeing. Although that's what it looked like from Naoto's position, he couldn't hear their conversation.

The conversation seemed to end quickly, and Kana left with a brief greeting, walking towards the school building. Haruka bowed several times to see her off, then turned to Naoto and Raquel and perked up.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Nao-kun!" she said, breathless, clasping her hands in front of her face as she approached. Naoto stared back blankly, still clutching the discarded paper pack in his hand.

"Huh? What's up all of a sudden?"

"I can't go shopping with you today like we promised. The cultural festival is coming up soon, and there's something I have to do today that can't be put off."

"Oh, is it student council stuff?"

"Yeah. I was supposed to get help from Kirishima-senpai, but she just told me she has something important she can't miss..." Haruka glanced over her shoulder, referring to the brief encounter they just had moments before. Her brows furrowed in apology. "So, I'm really sorry, Nao-kun, Raquel-chan. Please head home without me. I think I'll be late."

"And if you get hungry before dinner, go ahead and eat something,"

"Alright, got it. Don't stay too late either."

"Okay, see you later!" With a cheerful wave to both Naoto and Raquel, Haruka hurried back to the school building. She was a hard worker, always running around doing club activities at school and helping out with chores at home. Thinking to himself, "I could never do that," Naoto tossed the empty paper pack into the nearby trash can.

"Looks like we have some free time now," he said, glancing back at Raquel. She had also finished her pink drink and dropped the empty carton into the trash can.

"Perfect. Let's go. I hate doing things twice. I don't want to lose sight of her."

"Fair enough, but... I can't believe you're the same person who was nearly fainting just a moment ago," Naoto replied.

With Kana and Haruka gone, Raquel regained her usual confident demeanor, brushing her bangs aside with her fingers. Now that Kana and Haruka were gone, Raquel regained her usual assertive and arrogant attitude, brushing her bangs aside with her fingers. Following Raquel as she walked ahead, Naoto gathered his courage inwardly, though he didn't say anything. If Kana was in contact with Spinner, it meant that following her might bring them much closer to Spinner.

Even if he could obtain the Azure, it was undoubtedly more dangerous than Naoto had anticipated. He needed to prepare himself. He wasn't sure what kind of resolve he needed to make, but he couldn't help but wear a serious expression.

The evening downtown area was overflowing with a diverse array of people and voices, mainly students returning from school. Most of the voices were cheerful and excited. There were groups of people laughing loudly at silly jokes, and groups of girls screaming excitedly about

idols. Every day around this time, until after the sun had completely set and it was time for dinner, this area was like this.

However, Naoto and Raquel were not walking through the lively main street, but rather a quiet back alley lined with closed shutters. After leaving school, it wasn't difficult to follow Kirishima Kana. Perhaps to hide her uniform, Kana ducked into the shadows as they approached the shopping district. From her Boston bag, she pulled out a bright red coat and wrapped it around herself. Once they entered the dimly lit back alley, she pulled the hood low over her head, concealing her striking appearance.

Indeed, if she dressed like that, even if she happened to pass by someone she knew, it was unlikely anyone would recognize her as Kirishima Kana. Nobody would think she would walk in such a conspicuous manner in a place like this. However, for Naoto and Raquel, who had followed her from school and witnessed her putting on the red coat, that eye-catching appearance served as a perfect marker.

Two blocks in from the main street, the back alley was quite far from the hustle and bustle, even near the station, and there were few people around at this time of day. Kana walked through it at an uncertain, hesitant pace.

(Where is she going...?)

By now, the initial guilt they felt about following her had faded. Naoto hid behind building entrances and parked cars, focusing all his attention on Kana's every move. Kana suddenly slowed her pace at the entrance to an alley. She must be getting close to her destination. She wandered around, waiting for the street to clear, then quickly turned and entered the alley.

Naoto and Raquel immediately followed. The end of the alley Kana chose was a dead end. At the end was an old three-story building, and the figure in the red coat was going up the narrow stairs.

"Second floor," Raquel whispered, peering into the gap between the building Kana had entered and the neighboring building. It was a narrow building. There would probably be only one room per floor, whether it was a shop or a residence. If they followed her now, they would meet up halfway.

"What could she be doing in a place like this... Could Spinner be there?" Naoto asked, leaning against the wall in the cramped hiding spot.

Raquel shook her head while looking up at the building. "I don't sense any remnants of the Azure from this building. But... it's suspicious."

"I agree." Naoto wholeheartedly agreed with Raquel's suspicious tone. It was entirely based on preconceived notions and biases, but he couldn't imagine the vice president of the student council stopping by a place like this after school. It was very different from a bookstore or a

general goods shop. He could predict that there were circumstances in that second floor that were far removed from Kana's known image at school.

"Thanks to the stronger remnants compared to yesterday, I can track Kirishima Kana even if she's a bit further away. When she comes out, I'll investigate that building first." It wasn't a suggestion but a command. Raquel clearly didn't expect Naoto to voice any objections.

However, Naoto had no objections. After about ten minutes, Kana reappeared on the stairs. She hurriedly descended the steps and quickly left the alley. After waiting for the figure in the red coat to turn the corner and disappear, Naoto and Raquel slipped out through a narrow gap and looked up at the building where Kana had just exited. It didn't look like anyone lived there. There were three mailboxes on the side of the stairs, but none of them had nameplates. Instead, they were covered in suspicious-looking phone numbers.

Pink flyers were plastered on it. Naoto frowned involuntarily. It was an even more unlikely building for Kana.

(Come on... cut me some slack. I don't want to witness anything shady)

He sincerely hoped so as he stepped onto the stairs. They were headed to the second floor. Or rather, it seemed that only the second floor was being used. As far as he could see, there was no one around. It was an unpleasant silence. The sound of his footsteps on the stairs echoed.

He reached the second floor and stood in front of the only door. It was a very ordinary door. It was a heavy metal door like the ones you would find in old apartment buildings or old-fashioned public housing complexes. But when he saw the small sign that had been hung up in place of a nameplate, Naoto was momentarily disoriented, as if he had lost his sense of left and right.

His thoughts stopped. Written on the horizontal plate in rounded characters was probably the name of the shop.

It said, "Department of Sexual Desire."

(...Wait, what? I don't understand, I don't understand.)

Naoto's mind refused to comprehend. A strange sweat began to bead on his back. A sense of crisis ran down his spine. He probably saw something he shouldn't have. If everything he saw wasn't a mistake, it meant that Kirishima Kana had come out of this place not too long ago.

"What are you doing? Move aside." While Naoto was sweating bullets, Raquel brushed past him and opened the door to enter.

"Wait—!"

Naoto called out, but he was too late. The door closed behind Raquel. Realizing the gravity of the situation, Naoto grabbed the door as it was about to close and jumped in. And he was stunned.

It was a shop about twelve tatami mats in size. Long, white, tubular lights were regularly attached to the ceiling, making the interior surprisingly bright. But the items illuminated by that light were...

"Naoto, what is this?" Raquel, who had entered the shop first, looked at the shelves with a curious expression, picked up one of the items, and showed it to him. Naoto could only open and close his mouth, unable to speak. It was in a transparent package that allowed you to see the contents, and it was impressively larger than Raquel's arm. It was a thick, fleshy, arrow-shaped object, dark in color.

"What is it used for...?" While turning it over and over, Raquel held a thin plastic package...

He stared intently through the cage. He couldn't bear to look any longer. Just as Naoto took a step forward to try to stop it, a male employee slowly emerged from the back of the store.

"Welcome. What are you looking for, boys?" The man who appeared made Naoto flinch involuntarily. He was a tall, muscular man with a shaved head. He had a mustache under his nose, dark sunglasses that obscured his eyes, and a black leather jacket. He clearly wasn't a law-abiding citizen.

But the pale pink apron with the shop name written on it, worn over his tough leather jacket, strangely softened his tough, unusual appearance. Or perhaps it ruined it.

"What's this?" Without hesitation, Raquel turned to the male employee and, without being intimidated by his appearance, held out the product she had in her hand. The male employee looked Raquel up and down and then grinned wryly, lifting the corner of his mouth.

"This is 'Super Thick'... I don't think she can handle this yet, right?" He turned his gaze to Naoto, seeking agreement through his dark sunglasses.

"N-no..." Approaching Naoto as he awkwardly searched for words to explain himself, the clerk took a product from the shelf and casually handed it to Naoto.

"You guys must be newbies, right? Well, why don't you start with something like this?" Since he had been handed it, Naoto had to look. He moved only his eyes and looked down at the object he was holding. A smaller version of the same object, clearly smaller than the previous one, was enshrined in a plastic package. The label with the product name politely stated "For Beginners."

"There are different sizes," Raquel remarked as she leaned over to peek at Naoto's item, comparing it to what she was holding before returning the glossy black "Super Thick" to the shelf. She then shifted her interest to another shelf, picking up something and starting to

examine it. The enthusiastic employee quickly joined her, standing next to the petite girl in uniform to explain the products to new customers.

"Oh, you have a good eye! That one's the latest model!"

"What do you use it for?"

"Well, that depends on your boyfriend, I guess." The clerk winked at Naoto with a suggestive look. It was kind of vague, since he couldn't see his eyes through the sunglasses, but Naoto could feel that atmosphere strongly.

(Ugh, what are they talking about? I'm curious but don't want to know... And I'm not her boyfriend! Even if I were, don't look at me like that!)

At that moment, Naoto fully experienced what it meant to feel utterly uncomfortable.

"Wait, that's not what I mean!" Snapping back to reality, Naoto looked up. In his shock, he had forgotten his original purpose for coming here. He casually returned the "Beginner" item to the shelf and went over to the clerk.

"Hey, did a woman in a red coat come in here a little while ago? I need to know what she was doing."

"Sorry, kid. I can't tell you about a customer's privacy," came a low, slightly mocking reply. That was a fair point. Especially in a place like this, revealing secrets would jeopardize their business.

(I didn't expect the employee to be this professional...)

He had thought he would be more careless. Pushing past Naoto, Raquel directed her gaze at the employee, her eyes suddenly sparkling bright red.

"Answer the question." She gave a simple order. As soon as he heard it, the clerk, as if drawn to her, trembled and then relaxed unnecessarily.

"...A woman in a red coat did come in." The employee casually shared what had previously been a guarded secret, as if it were nothing. Naoto could sense a strange, dazed look about him.

(The 'Slave Red'...)

A magic that forces a person to accept one statement, but only once. When it had been used on Haruka, it had been to make her swallow a ridiculous explanation, but now he realized it could be used this way too. Under the spell of the obedient eye, Raquel pressed on with her questioning.

"What did she come here for?"

"She came to pick up an item she had ordered... here it is." With unsteady, floating steps, the clerk went to the counter and opened a catalog that was placed there

A stunning array of products were lined up with photos. The clerk pointed one by one at some of the products labeled "latest" with his thick silver ringed finger.

"This one, and this one... and this one too." With each item the employee indicated, deep furrows formed in Naoto's brow. Silk lingerie, hand mirrors, bondage costumes... among others. He didn't have extensive knowledge about such a world, but even Naoto could understand the special sexual preferences these items catered to.

"What kind of magic are these used for?"

"Magic? No, these are used for 'play.'"

"Prayers? Are they ritual tools?"

"Rituals, huh? That's a deep way to put it. 'Play' is..."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Stop! That's enough! I can't take any more of this!" Feeling mentally overwhelmed, Naoto stepped between the clerk and Raquel, shouting to interrupt them. Grabbing Raquel's arm, he urged her towards the exit. "Thank you, Mr. Employee! This was really educational!"

"Wait, Naoto, what are you doing? Let go of me!" Raquel exclaimed, her eyes narrowing in indignation as she thought they were still in the middle of gathering information. But he couldn't go into every detail, nor did he want to. Besides, he had a bad feeling, a premonition. He wanted to get back to tracking down Kana as soon as possible.

"I'll explain everything later, so just come on! If we keep wasting time here, we'll lose track of her!"

Hurriedly and angrily, Naoto dragged Raquel out of the "Department of Sexual Desire." As the heavy metal door closed, a low voice seemed to echo from inside, saying, "Come again," but he had no time to respond and ran down the stairs two at a time.

Once they reached the first floor, he jumped out of the narrow entrance into the alleyway and finally released Raquel, whom he had been carrying under his arm. As always, Raquel was light. So light that he could carry her down the stairs. Her lightness was abnormal, as if indicating that she wasn't human.

"You're such an anxious servant. Don't worry, I can track Kirishima Kana in no time," Raquel sighed, carefully smoothing her disheveled bangs while looking down at him.

"That's not the point..." Panting for breath, Naoto said resentfully.

(Damn it, I don't know exactly how you were created, but if he's her father, he should have taught her more, that damn old man!)

With no one else to blame for the situation, Naoto directed his anger and frustration at Raquel's father. However, he would never say that to the man's face.

While Naoto was catching his breath and cursing at someone who wasn't there, Raquel quickly finished drawing a small magic circle on the ground.

"It's much smaller this time." It was even more simplified than the one he had seen behind the school building. "I already know my target this time. This is enough." Saying so, Raquel reached out as if to embrace something in the center of the magic circle. The wind gathered, lifting her where she stood. The magic circle was enveloped in a city-colored light.

It was a familiar, usual magic. The light soon subsided, and Raquel's toes touched the ground. She dispersed the wind by lifting her eyelids and shook her head as if to shake off her hair.

"I found her."

"That was fast!"

"I told you, didn't I? It can be done quickly." With a hint of pride in her voice, Raquel entwined her arm with Naoto's, pulling him close to her chest.

"W-wait?"

"I'm going to fly us closer. Don't struggle. I might drop you."

"W-what the..." Naoto's words were cut off. Suddenly, a wind incomparably stronger than before enveloped Naoto and Raquel, swirling thickly. Then, with tremendous force, it lifted their bodies into the air. The surprise left Naoto speechless.

With Naoto in tow, Raquel stood in midair, guiding the winds with her fingertips. Following her lead, the wind picked up strength, propelling both her and her companion away at breakneck speed.

"Look, over there." Raquel's sharp voice cut through the swirling wind, signaling the end of Naoto's aerial journey. The wind, which had been roughly but obediently carrying Naoto and Raquel, softened its force as it determined their landing point and gently lowered them to the ground. But when the weight that had been supported by the wind suddenly returned, Naoto was unable to brace himself and collapsed to the side.

"Oof!"

"Pathetic," Raquel, who had been carrying him a moment ago, casually released her arm and looked down at Naoto, who was sprawled on the ground.

"You..." Naoto glared up at Raquel, his temples twitching in annoyance, fully aware of how awkward he looked. But despite his anger, Naoto felt a slight sense of exhilaration inside. It had been less than a minute.

But the experience of soaring high on the wings of the wind, flying over the rooftops of the apartment buildings, had thrilled Naoto. It was as if his youthful heart had been stirred. Compared to the dream of flying he had had as a child, the reality was much more exhilarating, and much more terrifying. His hands, which were planted on the ground, trembled slightly.

"Naoto, don't space out. We might lose her," Raquel urged.

"R-right..." Naoto shook off the lingering sensation of flight, slapping his cheeks lightly to regain focus and stood up.

"This way."

With a clear sense of Kana's location guided by the residual energy, Raquel led the way, and Naoto followed closely behind. Resuming their tail, Naoto immediately felt a sense of unease about the surrounding area. They were in an old residential district within walking distance of the station. Its antiquity was far deeper than that of the surrounding neighborhoods, as if the passage of time had cast a gloomy shadow over this particular block.

If the unmanned apartment complex project had progressed smoothly, this would have been the next area to be developed. As a result, many residents had moved away, and few remained. Those who still lived there were either reluctant to move ahead of the development plan or had missed the opportunity. Or perhaps they were attracted to the cheap rent of the properties, which were considered spooky due to their age and dimness.

It was highly unlikely that Kana would live in a place like this. Some part of this residential area must be her destination. With that in mind, Naoto tightened his grip.

Kana was just around the corner. Her bright red coat stood out against the gray world like a single drop of color, both vivid and precarious. She passed by a dilapidated house that looked like it could collapse at any moment, and then an apartment building of an old design that was rarely seen these days. Finally, she entered a certain apartment building.

Looking up, Naoto couldn't help but exclaim, "Whoa."

It was evening, and the sun must have begun to set beyond the clouds. The cloudy sky was dim. A gloomy atmosphere seemed to creep into the area as if night had come early, and the temperature had dropped significantly.

The apartment building Kana had entered was five stories tall and long. It must have been a dazzling building with white tiles pasted all over it. But now it was dirty and grimy everywhere, and in some places, the tiles had fallen off.

It had probably been years, or even more than a decade, since it had been cleaned. The accumulated dust clearly marked where people walked and where they didn't, and the thick glass door at the entrance was completely clouded, making it impossible to see clearly what was on the other side.

"Here...?" Naoto murmured, stopping in front of the entrance. He could hear Kana's footsteps ascending the stairs. There was something that looked like an elevator in front of him, but she wasn't using it, perhaps because it was broken. Considering the state of the building, it was entirely possible.

"No doubt about it. I can faintly sense the remnants of the Azure from various parts of this building," Raquel said, her gaze fixed on the apartment building, her eyes narrowed. A sense of tension began to spread slowly.

Naoto took a shallow breath and turned to look at her profile.

"So, is Spinner in there?"

"No... The Azure residue is still too weak to belong to Spinner. Besides, a magician of his caliber wouldn't leave such obvious traces behind. Most likely, what remains is the residue of his Apostle."

"Apostle..." Naoto muttered bitterly, following Raquel's gaze as she stared up at the apartment building. The image of the bug-like creature he had encountered in the unmanned apartment complex flashed through his mind. The disgusting way the bugs had burst out of its head still sent a shiver down his spine.

"So, Kirishima-senpai got involved with that Apostle, which is why I can sense the remnants of the Azure... I can't get Senpai caught up in this. For now, I'll just keep an eye on things..." If he was going to make a move, it would have to be after ensuring Kana's safety. As he thought this and formulated his plan, he turned around again—but Raquel was nowhere to be found.

"Hey... what?" He frantically looked around. Then, a shocking sight caught his eye. Raquel had somehow already gone inside and was chasing after Kana up the stairs.

"What the hell is she thinking?!" If Kana noticed her, how would she explain it? Or worse, what if Spinner's Apostle spotted Raquel and attacked? She could put Kana in danger. And most importantly, was she not considering the possibility that this could be a trap, with Kana as bait?

"Damn it!" he cursed, and dashed towards the heavy glass door at the entrance of the apartment building. He had to hurry, but he also had to be careful not to make too much noise and alert Kana. He quietly climbed the stairs, two at a time.

As he passed the fourth floor and headed towards the fifth, he heard Raquel's voice. "What are you doing here?" she demanded in a sharp tone.

"That idiot..." Naoto hissed under his breath as he ran up the remaining steps.

Raquel stood elegantly in the fifth-floor hallway. Her unwavering golden gaze was fixed on Kirishima Kana, who was wearing a red coat with the hood pulled up over her head. Through the triangular opening of the red fabric, her surprised and frightened expression was clearly visible.

Kana was standing in front of the room at the very end of the fifth floor. She was about to press the intercom button. Her white fingertips trembled slightly as she hovered over the small button.

"Alucard-san... Kurogane-kun... w-why..." Kana's voice, which Naoto had never heard before, was weak and trembling as she looked up at them with wide eyes. The large Boston bag she was carrying slipped from her hand and fell to the ground.

"Oh..." With a heavy thud, the Boston bag bounced once on the floor before coming to a stop. The contents spilled out of the bag, caught on the partially open zipper, which had been forcibly jammed shut.

Naoto frowned at the items scattered across the hallway. There were ropes, handcuffs, strange leather bands he didn't recognize, and even red candles - all items he had seen in the catalog from the store they had visited earlier.

"No... no, no, no!"

Finally realizing what was scattered at her feet, Kana looked up at Raquel and Naoto with wide, tear-filled eyes. She crawled on the floor, gathering the scattered "tools" with trembling hands.

"No... no, don't look! It's not what it looks like...!" Where was the perfect, elegant young lady? The "queen" of Shinkawahama First High School, the dignified and beautiful vice president of the student council? She was nowhere to be found. Ignoring the dirt on her clothes, she knelt on the grimy hallway floor, desperately trying to gather the scattered items.

Her cheeks were wet with tears, like a scolded child. She curled up into a ball, using her body to hide the items she had gathered. Her usually flowing black hair was now plastered to her tear-stained cheeks, dragged along the dusty floor.

"What were you doing here? Answer me." Standing in front of Kana, Raquel asked again in a stern voice. Naoto grimaced slightly and scratched his head.

(Man, as soon as she gets the upper hand, she immediately reverts to her usual self...)

Just a few hours ago, when he'd run into Kana at school, he'd been so out of breath. Raquel's domineering gaze made Kana look even weaker and more pathetic.

"I'll ask her," he said, and then, somewhat forcefully, he crouched down in front of Kana. "Senpai..."

"Please..." Kana lifted her tear-streaked face and clung to Naoto's feet, pushing various items further into her skirt in a desperate attempt to hide them. "Please, I'll do anything... I'll do anything, just don't say...!"

"Anything...?" Naoto furrowed his brow, his voice filled with disgust. "Anything" was a big word. Especially coming from Kana. He couldn't believe she would say something like that so easily. The thought made a heavy, unpleasant feeling settle in his chest.

"Kirishima-senpai, I won't tell anyone about this. So, can you please tell me what happened?" Perhaps he should have spoken more gently. Even as he thought that, his voice sounded harsh and interrogative. Nevertheless, Kana, between sobs and gasps for air, managed to speak in a barely audible voice.

"Well, it started with an online post. I was just curious, you know? Wondering what kind of store it was... But when I went out, my teacher saw me. He asked me what I was buying at a place like this and said that if I didn't want everyone to know, it would have to be our little secret. So, I promised him just once, and I came here... But then I found out that he'd been filming it!" And from there, it was the usual pattern.

Blackmailed with the videos he'd taken, she was forced to do things she didn't want to do, over and over again. The more she did, the more he had on her, and the harder it became to refuse his demands.

"This is disgusting..." Naoto muttered under his breath. The teacher probably used the store himself. Otherwise, why would he call it a "place like this" without even knowing what was inside?

"But lately, he seems to be getting bored of me... He keeps talking about Haruka, Haruka, Haruka..." Kana's words, delivered through sniffles, felt like a bucket of cold water to Naoto.

"Haruka...? Wait, what do you mean!?" Grabbing Kana by the shoulders, Naoto forced her to look up. A bad feeling was creeping up his spine, the same chill he'd felt when he'd left the back alley store.

Kana clutched at Naoto's sleeve with trembling hands, but couldn't meet his gaze. "Lately, my teacher has been acting strange. Today, he ordered me to bring Haruka. But I couldn't let anything happen to her, I couldn't let her go through this... so I thought I'd have to satisfy him, so I bought new things..." She couldn't finish her sentence and hung her head low.

Naoto pulled his hand away from Kana's shoulder. If he hadn't, he might have squeezed it in anger. He looked up at the intercom button Kana had been about to press. His gaze slid upward as he searched for the nameplate. The name read... "Isa."

(Isa...?)

Naoto couldn't believe his eyes. But his disbelief was quickly replaced by anger.

"...What the hell."

Naoto stood up, his throat vibrating with restrained rage. He didn't have any particular feelings for Kana. Nor did he respect or rely on Isa. So he didn't feel betrayed by either of them.

But this was going too far. The idea of him trying to get his hands on Haruka was unforgivable.

"You're messing with the wrong person, Isa!"

Yelling out in frustration, Naoto grabbed the doorknob and pulled. It was locked, of course. But undeterred, he pulled again, this time with all his might.

With a sickening crack, the door swung open. The lock had broken, its shattered pieces clinking to the floor. Stepping over them, Naoto entered the room.

The kitchen was the first thing he saw, followed by two connected Japanese-style rooms. The back room was long, with a futon laid out in the far corner. A three-legged stool stood at the foot of the bed. But there was no camera.

"How disgusting," Raquel muttered, following Naoto into the room and wrinkling her nose. She covered her mouth with her hand.

The apartment was dirty and cluttered, typical of a single man who didn't clean up after himself. Empty beer cans were scattered around the kitchen, and a used lunchbox was tossed onto a low table in the middle room. Clothes were strewn everywhere, including underwear.

"No one's here," Raquel said calmly, passing Naoto as he surveyed the room. She walked to the far room and gently touched the thin futon. She muttered a short incantation, and light emanated from her fingertips, spreading throughout the room. "Just as I thought. The master of this room is a Spinner's Apostle."

"Damn it..." Naoto grimaced. If Isa was a minion of Spinner's, that meant they were after Haruka.

"Raquel, can you find Isa's location!?"

"Don't order me around. I'm your master."

Though she sounded annoyed, Raquel quickly drew a magic circle on the floor. Naoto was momentarily relieved; despite her grumbling, she was always willing to help. He watched in awe as the magic circle formed beneath her white fingers. After a short incantation, the air swirled and light flashed. When Raquel opened her eyes, she blinked in surprise. "Oh... the school?"

A cold sensation pierced Naoto. He remembered the uneasy feeling he'd had when he'd left the back alley store. A bad feeling. This must have been what it meant.

Thinking it would be worse... Haruka's words echoed in Naoto's mind.

"Damn it!" Naoto bolted from Isa's apartment, brushing past Kana who was still weeping. He raced down the stairs.

(This is such a pain!)

Without a second thought, Naoto placed his hand on the wall of the landing and launched himself outside. He wasn't thinking at all. The only thing on his mind was getting to the school as quickly as possible. Naoto jumped down from a height that would normally be dangerous, but he landed without any damage and immediately took off running at breakneck speed.

He thought he heard Raquel calling after him, but he didn't have time to look back. He took out his phone and called Haruka. Instead of a ringtone, a recorded message informed him that the person he was trying to reach was out of service. Annoyingly, there was no cell phone reception in any of the classrooms at Shinkawahama First High.

"Damn it... damn it, damn it!" He realized that the sun had set and the sky was growing dark, the streetlights casting a pale glow. How much time had passed? The wind had picked up, and the clouds that had covered the sky all day were beginning to break up.

He pushed against the wind that was blowing directly into his face. His stomach was churning with a mixture of anger and anxiety. His body was burning with passion.

Chapter 5 — Encounter

The square window outside had turned dark sometime during her work, and the veil of night had completely fallen. She realized that time had passed much faster than she thought when she finally started to see the end of her work. She had been so focused on her task that her shoulders and back ached, and she leaned back in her chair and stretched her arms wide.

Then, she glanced at the round clock on the wall beside the whiteboard and was surprised.

"What time is it already?! Oh, no..." She had been working with her back to the clock, so she hadn't noticed. Haruka sat up straight, twisted in her chair, and widened her eyes at the time. She needed to get home soon or she would be too late to prepare dinner. However, she was almost done. She thought about coming back early tomorrow morning to finish up, but...

"I can finish this in another hour. Let's do it!" She was the kind of person who believed in finishing what she started today. She took a sip of green tea from the bottle beside her and, with renewed vigor, pulled the next document towards her.

That's when it happened.

"Huh?"

The door to the student council room suddenly opened. Haruka turned around in surprise, and a familiar teacher entered.

"Oh, Isa-san. I'm sorry for keeping you waiting so late." It was already thirty minutes past the official closing time. The reason Haruka could stay so late without worrying was because Isa, who was in charge of the keys, had told her to use the room as long as she needed.

"No, it's fine. So, how are you doing? Almost finished?" Isa looked around the student council room, his tone much softer than he usually was in class. He was carrying a large bag. He probably planned to go home as soon as Haruka was finished.

"I'm sorry, just a little more." She wondered if she was staying too late. With that thought in mind, Haruka returned to her desk to try to make some progress.

"Hayami, you're doing great. Staying late all by yourself," he said.

"No, it's nothing."

It felt strange being praised by Isa. She smiled vaguely and continued writing.

As she extracted the necessary information from the documents, Haruka suddenly remembered something.

"By the way, Isa-san, you were absent yesterday. Were you feeling unwell?"

"Oh, no," came a reply with a hint of a smile, as if he had forgotten until it was mentioned.
"Actually, my health has been quite good lately."

Haruka felt a shiver run down her spine at the way he laughed, as if the words were caught in his throat.

And then it happened. The sound of the student council room door locking. Haruka stopped and turned around.

"..Isa-san?"

Isa was inside the student council room. He stood with his back to the locked door and slowly approached Haruka, his gaze fixed on her.

"Do you know... that right now, just the two of us are in this school?" Isa, who usually had a stern expression, smiled wickedly. His tired eyes held an unusually intense light.

Haruka jumped up from her chair with a start. Something was wrong with Isa. Feeling an instinctive sense of danger, she ran towards the back door of the classroom. She pulled the door to open it, but it was locked.

"No way, why..."

The door hadn't been locked from this side. Frantically, she pulled it again and again, then realized. It was locked from the other side.

At the sound of a small noise, Haruka turned around in surprise. She saw Isa setting up what looked like a camera on the desk. For a moment, her gaze shifted from Haruka to the camera. Determined to escape, Haruka sprinted toward the front door, but Isa quickly noticed and spread his arms to block her.

"Where are you going, Haruka-kun...?"

"Get away from me, Isa-san!" Haruka looked at Isa sternly, her voice trembling as she shouted. But Isa only smiled more deeply. He took a step closer, as if to corner her. Haruka took a step back. Breathing heavily, Isa reached for his clothes and began to awkwardly remove his wrinkled shirt.

She couldn't bear to look. Haruka let out a strangled cry and shrank back, covering her face with her hands. She heard the sound of his belt buckle being undone. The sound of the zipper being lowered, followed by the sound of his pants being discarded.

"Isa-san... please stop..." Haruka trembled violently. A paralyzing fear gripped her. She couldn't escape. She didn't know how to escape.

"Haruka-kun. Look at me," Isa said in a threatening tone. Haruka, trembling, slowly lifted her face.

"Ah!" She let out a sudden scream and covered her mouth with her hands.

Iza, now stripped naked, stood there in a bizarre form. His stomach sagged in a way typical of most middle-aged men, but not completely. He stood there, his exposed flesh partially concealed by a perverse, black leather harness.

In his hand, he held a whip with a number of leather belts attached to its black handle, which he had probably taken out of a bag. Isa held it out to Haruka.

"Come on, Haruka-kun, beat me with this!"

"Wha- what are you saying?"

"Beat me and insult me. Pig, this pig, this happy pig! Oh, I don't care what you do to me!"

Overwhelmed by the situation, Haruka's fear receded like a wave for a moment. Instead, she was engulfed in confusion and bewilderment.

Her thoughts came to a halt. *'What is he saying?'*

"P... pig?"

"Yes! Exactly! Keep going! Oh wait, I almost forgot...!"

Haruka stood there, bewildered. Isa, realizing he had slipped into a trance-like state, panicked and then switched to a state of urgency. Grabbing the bag at his feet, he pulled out a black object. Holding it with both hands, he spread it out.

It was a costume designed to resemble a swimsuit, but with a far more intricate and suggestive design, intended to expose the wearer in a sexually provocative manner. It was a female bondage outfit, even more sexually suggestive than the one Isa was already wearing. When Haruka realized what it was, her confusion melted away, replaced by a dawning understanding of Isa's intentions.

And so, Isa made his request. 'Now, Haruka-sama, please put this on. I prepared it especially for you... here!'"

"N-no way! Absolutely not!" Haruka shook her head vigorously, her whole body rejecting the idea. But Isa, undeterred, inched closer and closer. It was a repulsive sight. Feeling her blood run cold, Haruka rallied and ran again, desperate to put distance between herself and Isa.

But Iza grabbed her arm, even though he shouldn't have been that close yet.

"No..."

"Put it on... You will wear it!"

"No!" Isa pulled hard on Haruka's arm as she struggled to break free. It was an incredible strength. Her body was easily dragged over to his side.

Isa pushed Haruka down onto the row of desks. Holding her resisting wrists together, he pressed them against the cold surface, tearing her sailor uniform blouse apart from the collar in one swift motion.

"Kyaa!" Haruka let out a loud scream at the loud sound of the cloth tearing. Isa threw away the white cloth he had torn off. The large tear ran diagonally across the uniform, exposing Haruka's pale pink bra and white skin. Touching her soft belly with the palm of her hand, Isa gave a sly smile.

"Come on, Haruka-sama, let's get dressed!" Isa's hand slid across her skin and reached for Haruka's skirt. Haruka struggled desperately, writhing on the desk. Her skin was ripe with a bad feeling.

"N... Naoto-kun... Naoto-kun!"

She tried desperately to kick Isa away, her trembling body moving with all its might. But she was trapped between Isa and the desk. His fingers brushed against the hook of her skirt. "No, Naoto-kun! Help meeee!" she cried out.

"Roger that!"

Haruka closed her eyes tightly and screamed. The next moment, the door to the student council room was blown open. Naoto kicked the door down and burst in. He leaped over the fallen door and punched Isa right in the face. His fist, which had turned crimson in mid-air, sank deep into Isa's nose. Isa, who had been holding Haruka down, was blown back and fell to the floor. Naoto pulled Haruka away from the desk.

"Naoto-kun...? Is this real...?" Haruka stared at Naoto blankly and collapsed to the floor. Naoto patted her on the head.

"Perfect timing, wasn't it?" She forced a smile, but as soon as Naoki touched her head, she burst into tears, her composure shattered. "Naoto... Naoto..." she sobbed, her voice cracking. She buried her face in her hands and cried uncontrollably.

Naoto tried to comfort her, "It's okay now. Don't cry." But when he leaned in, she clung to his neck and wept even harder.

Supporting his weight against her, Naoto gently placed his hand on Haruka's head. It had been a long time since he saw her cry like this. Haruka didn't usually cry much. When she was sad, she could say she was sad; when she felt lonely, she could express her loneliness. Because of that, she often smiled in front of others. She believed that having even a little more time smiling peacefully, rather than lamenting and grieving, made both herself and others happier. Naoto

couldn't even begin to count how much peace he had received from her smile. But now, Haruka...

She was crying, overwhelmed by emotions she couldn't even express in words. The sensation of her cold tears seeped into Naoto's chest.

"...I'm sorry. Just sleep for a bit." Whispering softly in Haruka's ear as she clung to him, Naoto slid his hand from her head to her neck. He applied a little pressure with his fingertips. Suddenly, Haruka lost all strength from her body and leaned against Naoto. He carried Haruka to the corner of the student council room and laid her down on the floor.

Haruka was unconscious. Naoto took off his school uniform jacket and covered her torn clothes as if she were a crying child who had fallen asleep.

"You bastard..."

Fury bubbled up from the depths of his stomach as Naoto turned to see Isa on the other side of the classroom, holding his face and writhing in pain. He felt like he was about to vomit. Looking down at the man in the bondage suit, moaning incoherently as his nose flowed with blood, Naoto roared with burning passion.

"How long are you going to keep this up? Get up. I'll beat you up as much as you want, you sadistic bastard!"

At Naoto's forceful voice, Isa's body jolted and trembled. The slumped figure awkwardly rose. With his blood-stained hands hanging limply and an extreme hunch, Isa directed his hollow, murky eyes at Naoto.

"Ki-chi-chi."

Naoto gasped at that sound.

There was no doubt that the sound came from Isa. A hard, light sound, like an insect wriggling, could be heard from his half-open mouth, smeared with flowing blood.

"Come to think of it, he's Spinner's Apostle..."

The eerie sound, the distorted posture, and the vacant eyes—this confrontation reminded Naoto of the abandoned apartment complex from that time. That time, he had his right arm bitten off and was buried under rubble. But he couldn't afford to be so pathetic this time.

(I have to bring her back safely... If I don't, Yuki will kill me)

To spur himself on, Naoto glanced over his shoulder. He could see Haruka lying there, powerless. But right beside her, Raquel was there, somehow.

"Raquel!?"

"It's such a foolhardy thing to run off on your own, leaving your master behind. A thoughtless single-celled organism. How ridiculous." Kneeling beside Haruka and peering at her, Raquel looked up and said in a haughty yet somewhat sulky tone. "I'll keep an eye on Haruka. So fight without holding back."

"You have a knack for showing up at the right time... That helps. I'm counting on you," Naoto replied sarcastically, turning back to face Isa.

With Raquel here, he felt reassured. If push came to shove, she would probably run away with Haruka, even if it meant abandoning Naoto. At worst, as long as Haruka was safe, that would be enough.

"GAAAAAAH!" A shrill, menacing sound erupted from Isa's throat, slicing through the air. The voice carried an unpleasant stench that lingered in the atmosphere. It was the voice of a monster, not a human. Realizing that he had crossed a boundary into an extraordinary situation, a thread of crisis and tension tightened within Naoto.

"Come on!"

In response to Naoto's defiant challenge, something long and thin shot out of Isa's back and lunged towards him.

"Whoa...!" Naoto barely managed to leap sideways, avoiding the attack that was aimed to impale him on the floor from a diagonal angle. The classroom floor shattered where the attack had struck. Naoto scowled at the sight.

It was a pair of insect legs. They resembled the legs of a beetle or mantis, but they were covered in a harder exoskeleton, thicker, and built solely for the purpose of killing prey. They were black. The two legs protruded from Isa's back, piercing through the flesh and skin.

"Damn..."

He had known this would happen, but seeing this grotesque transformation firsthand sent a chill down his spine. Even though he was a half-vampire or immortal, he didn't have the heart to accept such a monstrous sight. Disgusting things were disgusting, and scary things were scary.

"You're backing away. What happened to the bravado from earlier?" Raquel's scornful voice came from behind. Naoto clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"Shut up, you bystander!" But that light retort gave Naoto a small measure of calm. This was no time to be messing around. Swallowing the tightness in his breath, he took a deep breath and steeled himself.

"GAAAAAAH!"

With a roar that no human could produce, Isa lifted the two monstrous legs that were embedded in the floor. Once again, he swung them around to pierce Naoto, and with a powerful kick, he launched himself towards his target.

"AAAARGH!"

"Ugh...!" This time, one of the insect legs swung around from the side, its sharp claws aiming to clamp down and pierce him. He couldn't dodge it. Naoto used both his arms as shields to block the attack.

His right arm held up perfectly, just as he had envisioned. It was as if he were wearing a metal gauntlet, his strength allowing him to withstand a force that was impossible for a normal human. But his left arm... it wasn't so lucky.

"Ugh... ugh..." It felt like he'd been hit hard with a metal bat. An unpleasant sound echoed as his forearm bent at an unnatural angle in the middle. Instinctively, he shook off Isa's leg, which he had blocked with his right arm, and swung at the other one that had broken his left arm. It was hard, with a heavy weight inside. Dodging under the leg that had been sent flying, Naoto escaped. As he did so, his eyes caught something.

The number above Isa's head had decreased. From '674' to '672'.

(It decreased! That means...!)

He was taking damage. A mere 2, but by simple calculation, if he hit that number about 340 times, he could reduce it to '0'. It wasn't impossible to defeat him. There was still hope.

Circling around to Isa's right, Naoto pulled his broken arm closer to protect it.

"...Huh?"

Noticing something strange, Naoto looked down at his left arm. It was supposed to be broken just a moment ago. But now, it was moving normally, without any pain.

"Oh, right, it heals...!"

Dodging a grab from Isa's human arm as he turned around, Naoto kicked him in the shin. He wanted to land another punch, but one of the monstrous legs swung down, slicing his shoulder, and Naoto jumped back.

"Ugh..." A red stain spread across the floor. But under Naoto's hand as he pressed down on his shoulder, the wound was already healing and disappearing. "Well... this is pretty handy, isn't it?"

Wiping his bloody hand on his pants, Naoto smirked. The only problem was that it still hurt like hell each time.

(If I have regenerative abilities, why can't it be more convenient in other ways...? I guess it doesn't offer that kind of service.)

The monster on Isa's back thrashed around, digging its claws into the floor as it chased after Naoto. Some of them caught Naoto, tearing his shirt and flesh. Heat and pain shot through his cheek, his thigh, and grazed his side. Naoto moved as quickly as he could, but the confined space of the classroom made it difficult. The desks were also a major obstacle.

"Damn it..." Naoto picked up a desk that was blocking his escape route and threw it at Isa. But the monstrous leg swung up and knocked it aside, sending it flying through the window. He tried again with a chair and another desk, hoping to hit something at least once, but all he managed to do was shatter the ceiling light and have the shards rain down on the creature.

"Running away? How boring." A heckling voice came from the sidelines, as if to taunt him.

"Shut up!" He shouted back angrily, but even Naoto knew that he couldn't keep running forever. And he didn't want to ask Raquel for help. Isa's attacks had torn the ceiling apart, shattered the walls, and sent chairs and desks flying. Raquel had created an invisible barrier to protect Haruka from the debris. He couldn't bring himself to ask her to stop.

As if bored of the chase, Isa suddenly turned around. His cloudy eyes, which seemed to be out of focus, landed on Raquel and Haruka. Raquel gasped and stepped forward to protect Haruka. Ignoring them, Isa raised his two monstrous legs and charged straight ahead with a groan.

"You bastard!" Naoto kicked the floor hard and jumped. Isa's legs swung down, trying to grab both Raquel and Haruka. He barely made it in time.

"Ugh..." The sharp, black claws pierced through both of his arms, which he had raised as shields, and then tore into his abdomen. But only the tips of the claws had reached him. They hadn't reached Haruka, or Raquel.

"Naoto!"

"I'm... fine..." Naoto forced a brave smile in response to Raquel's startled voice. He was secretly relieved. It was strange to hear her voice like this, as if she were genuinely worried about him.

"Don't underestimate me!" Roaring with all his might, Naoto tightened his fists around the arms that were impaled. With all his strength, he pushed back the black, piercing weapon. He could feel the hard object being pulled out of his abdomen. Then, raising his right arm, Naoto used the arm made of Raquel's blood to support his weight while freeing his left arm.

The wound burned. He wanted to cry. But the harsh reality of the situation made him swing his remaining right arm, ignoring the spreading wound. The claws that had been embedded in him were pulled out with force.

At that moment, Raquel unleashed a shockwave of wind aimed at Isa's now exposed abdomen.

“GAAAAAAH!”

With a deep, air-filled groan, Isa's body was forced back towards the window.

Naoto checked the number above his head. It hadn't decreased much. It wasn't a fatal blow. But he had gained some time. While Isa was recovering, Naoto's wounded body, which had been spitting blood, began to heal and return to its original form.

Isa cracked his neck and stood up. Naoto struggled to regulate his ragged breathing, trying to suppress his growing anxiety. The odds were against him. Thanks to Raquel's half-vampire transformation, Naoto's physical abilities had increased significantly. But his stamina wasn't infinite, and the pain still made him flinch. He couldn't keep running forever.

(But what am I supposed to do? Hit him another three hundred times?)

That was absurd, he'd run out of energy and die. He could only withstand the full impact of Isa's attacks with his right arm. The rest of his body couldn't handle the shock that his right arm could.

On top of that, he had to protect Haruka, even with Raquel's help.

(Protect... her?)

He thought back to Clavis. That incredible man had protected Naoto, Raquel, and Haruka while fighting against both Valkenhayn and Relius. While Naoto was struggling against Isa's four arms, Clavis had effortlessly cut through the countless hands that Relius used to restrain his movements.

The image of those beautifully sharp cuts flashed through Naoto's mind. Come to think of it, his own arm had been cut by Clavis, leaving a perfect, clean cut.

"Ugh..." Suddenly, Naoto grimaced in pain. A perfectly clean cut. The thing that could create such a cut must be... extremely sharp. That thought dredged up something from the depths of Naoto's memory. It was a vivid memory, filled with the smell of blood.

Something wet beneath his feet.

Something lying in his line of sight.

It had already died and turned into a black mass, but before that, it had been Naoto's mother.

The thing that had taken his mother's life... the thing that had turned her black.

Soaked in blood, it was so beautiful it was frightening... a blade.

A sharp sound tore through the air. Isa closed the distance in an instant, aiming for the slow-reacting Naoto, his monstrous leg raised high with a clear intent to kill. The thrust was incredibly fast. It was meant to pierce not only skin and flesh but also bone. The prey was

already captured and doomed. With such certainty, the black, gleaming, sharp claws were about to—but against the monster's intentions and Raquel's anxious anticipation, they did not pierce flesh or bone.

Instead of the wet sound of blood spattering, there was a clear, resonant clang of metal. Isa's monstrous attack had been deflected by something. Raquel gasped sharply. Her golden eyes widened in shock. When had this happened? Perhaps in just an instant, between one blink and the next.

Raquel was speechless at the figure standing before her.

It was Naoto, but he was not ordinary. He had transformed. His hair was now white, his eyes were red and slanted. And in his hand was a red, glowing sword. An opaque, crimson mass, formed from congealed blood, had become a sharp and menacing sword in Naoto's hand.

A blade of blood.

"Kiiiiiiiiiiii!" Isa roared in frustration and swung his monstrous black legs again. Naoto, transformed with white hair and red eyes, glared at his enemy with unwavering hostility and flashed the sword in his hand. The crimson slash was heavy yet light, describing a beautiful arc. It sliced through the air and cleanly severed the two monstrous legs with a cool sound. Red droplets danced in the air.

"Ah..."



Raquel let out an involuntary gasp. It was a sound of admiration. Tears streamed from her wide-open eyes for some reason. An unfamiliar emotion filled her chest. A feeling of sadness that was almost overwhelming.

Warming her cheeks with tears, Raquel stared at Naoto. She didn't want to miss a single moment of this scene, and watched intently without blinking.

"GU, GAAHHH!!" Despite the elegance of the slash, a hoarse cry rang out. The leg, severed from the middle down, splattered a dark green liquid instead of blood and bounced back with the recoil. Dragged by the momentum, Isa's body was thrown backward. And then...

"Uoooooh!" Naoto roared and took a deep step forward. The blood-stained blade was no longer in his hand. His hair and eye color had returned to normal. Gathering strength in his legs, abdomen, shoulders, and arms, Naoto swung his fist with all his might. It was his right arm that he thrust forward. In the dimly lit classroom, his fist, which roared as if it were alive, was dyed crimson. He drove his fist straight, heavily, into Isa's chest.

"Gubuuuu..."

The impact of the fist, driven deep, must have reached his internal organs. Isa convulsed a few times at the point where Naoto's fist had penetrated... and then collapsed to his knees. When the rampaging Isa fell silent, the classroom suddenly became eerily quiet.

All Naoto could hear was his own ragged breathing and his pounding heart as he stood there with his fist still thrust out. He couldn't quite comprehend what had happened. But as he looked down, his shoulders heaving, and saw Isa lying there convulsing like a dying fish, he finally let out a deep breath.

"I... did it..." He dropped his arm, which had been extended without strength. He took a few steps back, tripped, and fell to the floor. He was exhausted. Was it relief? Or maybe he didn't care anymore, it was over, he had won.

He glanced at the number still above Isa's head: '217'. He was still alive. Naoto breathed heavily, a sigh of relief escaping his lips.

(Thank goodness he's still alive... those numbers are bad, but... please don't die.)

He didn't like Isa. There was the matter with Haruka, and with Kana, and the Apostle's influence, and...

Naoto might have understood that, but even so, he felt he couldn't forgive Iza. Still, he couldn't bring himself to kill him. He hadn't come here wanting to commit murder or to vent his frustrations.

But then...

"... You're not going to kill him?" A voice called from behind, and Naoto, his breath still ragged, turned his head to look at the speaker. It was Raquel. Although her tone was stern, Naoto somehow understood that she wasn't blaming him. He shrugged with a wry smile.

"What? Weren't you going to ask him questions?" He needed to investigate the Azure and Spinner. Iza was an important lead. But Raquel walked over to Naoto, her expression unyielding.

"You don't think you can save him, do you?"

"What? You think it's impossible?" That was unexpected. Naoto forced a smile. "Well, you know, unlike the last guy, he still looks like Isa, and he doesn't seem to have those things coming out of his head..."

As he spoke, Naoto realized something. The bug men in the deserted housing complex had also seemed dead, but then their heads had suddenly split open and bugs had come out.

Raquel seemed to have the same thought. They exchanged tense glances and turned back to Isa at the same time. As if waiting for that moment, Isa's body began to tremble violently and then jumped up like a wound-up toy.

"Watch out!" Naoto, who had been slumping, pushed himself up off the floor and shoved Raquel behind him. But then, there was an unexpected interruption.

Countless dry, crackling sounds.

At the same time, Isa's body, which had risen in front of Naoto, began to tremble convulsively. His limbs exploded with flesh and bodily fluids.

"Wh-what?!"

Without a scream, Isa fell face down on the floor again, still in a defensive posture. The disgusting bodily fluids of the bug creature stained the classroom floor. Then, a group of people in full black gear burst through the entrance that Naoto had broken through earlier. They were like a police SWAT team. There were about ten of them. They each carried formidable-looking firearms, quickly took up positions in the corners of the classroom, and raised their muzzles as one.

The earlier cracking sounds had been gunshots.

Red laser pointers sought out their next target. The small red dots converged on Raquel. Holding his breath, Naoto shielded Raquel with his back again. Several red dots wandered around, searching for a target.

"Ugh," a voice out of place interrupted the tense atmosphere.

"Oh dear, look at the mess this classroom is in," she exclaimed with a sigh. Naoto jumped at the sound. It wasn't entirely unexpected, though. He'd completely forgotten about her, but she had mentioned she would be keeping an eye on things.

Entering the student council room, littered with broken glass and overturned desks, was Kiiro Hikagami. Dressed in a tight skirt with a deep slit and high heels, she looked completely out of place with her nonchalant complaints.

"Hehe, Naoto-kun. I'm here," she said, placing her hand lightly against her cheek and raising a shoulder, her face innocent. Raquel tensed behind Naoto. "Oh, well, that's enough of that. Why don't you all start cleaning up?" Kiiro waved casually at the black-clad figures standing guard around her, then gave instructions to Naoto in a completely different, indifferent tone.

The makeshift security team, moving with a trained precision, removed the red pointer from Raquel and holstered their guns. They quickly led something in from the corridor. Following them were three men dressed in white, not black, wearing white lab coats, rubber gloves, and white hats and masks. A stretcher, like the ones used in hospitals, was carried in, and the men in white lifted Isa's body onto it.

"Hey, wait a minute! What are you doing with him...?" Watching the methodical work, Naoto felt a strange sense of urgency and tried to stop them. But before he could, Kiiro stepped forward to block his way. "Hey, move..."

"That was amazing just now..." Her eyes were slightly flushed, tinted with a peachy hue as if painted on, and her lips, parted ever so slightly, seemed to... to somehow invite lust. With a shuddering, longing sigh, Kiiro let her fingers glide over Naoto's arm. She grabbed his right hand, pulling it firmly to her chest. Naoto's hand sank into her voluptuous breasts, pinching them between her soft tresses, and she pressed herself close to Naoto.

"Come on, touch me properly. Can't you tell how my heart is racing?" Feeling as if he was being drawn into a sensation he couldn't comprehend, Naoto instinctively tried to pull his hand away. But Kiiro held onto his hand tightly, not letting go.

As Kiiro said, beneath the pressed chest, an unusually rapid heartbeat thudded violently. It felt anything but normal. The excited and heightened heartbeat intensified with the sensation in Naoto's palm. As Kiiro had said, Naoto felt an abnormally fast heartbeat thumping beneath her pressed chest. It was far from normal. The sensation of Naoto's touch seemed to intensify the rapid beating.

"Oh... Naoto, you're going to get me into so much trouble... You're egging me on... Hey..." Kiiro said, coaxing Naoto's hand down her chest and gradually sliding it further. His hand traced her unprotected belly between her ribs, and by that time, she moved his hand past her navel and trembled slightly.

"Hah... come on. Cut me into pieces with 'Blood Edge', Naoto-kun..."

"Blood Edge'?" Naoto frowned, confused by the unfamiliar words.

"Yes, that's right..." With her mouth slightly open, her breath coming out in short, unsteady gasps, Kihiro led Naoto's hand towards her lower abdomen. Immediately, Naoto pulled his hand away with force, slapping Kihiro's hand away.

"No, don't." But she quickly grabbed his hand again, whining like a child who's had their toy taken away. She pushed past him and tried to bury her face in his chest, clearly determined not to let go this time. "Let go!" Naoto demanded, his eyes narrowing in a fierce glare.

Kihiro smiled, her lips curving into a smirk. "Amazing," she mused, her tone dripping with sarcasm. "You don't like being watched? I don't mind, but... you're so shy, aren't you?"

"What are you talking about? Let me go already." It was a disgusting feeling. A truly disgusting feeling, and Naoto could feel a prickling sensation along the bridge of his nose. Even that harsh expression made Kihiro's cheeks flush slightly, and with a single blink, a sharpness glimmered amidst her alluring demeanor.

"Should we help that guy, Iza?" Kihiro licked her painted lips seductively as she whispered the question, her eyes fixed on Naoto. Naoto returned her gaze with a mixture of confusion and suspicion. Behind Naoto, Raquel, who had returned to Haruka's side, watched the scene unfold with a mix of curiosity and uncertainty. With a look as if to gauge Kihiro's movements, she cast glances toward both of them.

Leaning closer to Naoto, Kihiro pressed her plump lips to his ear. "You want to help him, don't you? If Naoto-kun says so, I'll make a special exception. The corruption isn't too bad yet, and I can arrange treatment. ... I'll do anything Naoto-kun wants."

"R-Really? You can help him?"

"Hehe, impressive, right? This is the 'power of the organization.'... It's completely different from some incompetent girl somewhere. What I can do for you is on a whole different level. Don't compare me to a vampire." It seemed she was purposely letting them hear. While whispering to Naoto, Kihiro chose a volume loud enough for Raquel to hear.

Raquel glanced at Naoto once, then lowered her gaze to hide her expression. Although Naoto couldn't see it, she was biting her small lips in regret.

Kihiro let out a short, suggestive laugh and lightly raised her hand. At that signal, the lab-coated individuals, who had been waiting for instructions, quickly carried Isasa, who was on a stretcher, out of the student council room. Where were they taking him, and for what purpose? Naoto couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't just for treatment since he had become a Spinner's apostle.

"Oh, by the way. I'll show this to you too, Naoto-kun." Subduing her earlier seductive demeanor, Kihiro put on a girlish expression and gestured to one of the black-clad soldiers, who brought her a small tablet. With practiced ease, she navigated the screen and opened a video file.

She leaned close to Naoto and showed him the video. The familiar room appeared on the screen. And in that room, two familiar figures were shouting through a distorted voice.

"Look, what's wrong with you? Tell me what you want! You pig!"

"Please! More, more, please, Kana-sama!"

"A lowly pig shouldn't speak human words! A pig should squeal like a pig!"

"B-buhiiii!"

What unfolded was a picture-perfect S&M show. Naoto didn't want to think about who the black-haired dominatrix was, laughing loudly while wielding a whip, or who the man was, trembling with pleasure as he was whipped and crawling on all fours.

(She's definitely a "queen.")

The way she wielded the whip was so dignified that she seemed to be enjoying herself, even though she was being forced to do it.

"There are plenty more, you know~. Which one do you like?" Kihiro asked, looking up with a teasing tone. Naoto took a step back, his expression sour.

"I'll pass."

"Oh really? That's too bad, there were many more interesting ones..."

".....You looked at all of them?" He couldn't even guess how many there were in total, but judging by Kihiro's cheerful tone, it was clear that it wasn't just one or two more. Still, Isa's tastes were something else entirely. Turning the screen toward Naoto, Kihiro blinked mischievously from behind the tablet.

"So, I'll keep this video at the Mitsurugi Agency," Kihiro said.

"Keep it? You're not going to get rid of it?" Naoto furrowed his brow, displeased. He had naturally assumed they would dispose of it.

Kihiro shook her head, her hair bobbing from side to side. "It's insurance, just in case. Kirashima Kana probably won't expose this herself, but if her parents start making a fuss, we'll be in trouble." She said this as if it were for Naoto's benefit.

In other words, if they didn't want this video to become public, they should avoid causing unnecessary trouble. It seemed she intended to use it as leverage.

Knowing Kiiro, she probably had already investigated not just Kana Kirishima's parents but also her relatives, looking into what kind of people they were and their tendencies. That thought made both the Mitsurugi Agency and Kiiro as a person quite terrifying.

"...By the way, how is Kirishima-senpai?" Naoto asked Kiiro, sounding resigned. He had left her crying in front of Isa's apartment.

"I'm sure Kiiro-san was taking care of that follow-up."

Kiiro smiled and handed the tablet back to a nearby black-suited soldier. "Of course, the Mitsurugi Agency is protecting her. Oh, and don't worry, I'll have this classroom restored by tomorrow."

Naoto glanced at it and looked around. There was something else he was curious about.

"They're not here, are they? Those guys."

"Which guys?"

"Valkenhayn and Relius." If those two with their extraordinary fighting abilities were here, they could have easily knocked Iza unconscious in seconds. Realizing his own weakness, Naoto felt a tingling sensation in his fingertips.

Seeing Naoto secretly crumpling up his feelings of powerlessness in his fist, Kiiro feigned surprise. "If Clavis Alucard were here, I would quickly call for them, but it's a waste of resources to bring those people out for a small fry like this. They're expensive, you know."

(...*Expensive.*)

Naoto couldn't help but chuckle, surprised by the sudden mention of money. He didn't know that 'slayer of the undead' was a business. Were they like mercenaries? It was funny to imagine those monstrous duo worrying about annual salaries and bonuses.

But Naoto turned his chuckle into a sigh and slumped his shoulders. He felt like everything was going exactly as Kiiro wanted. He felt like a puppet. But there was nothing he could do. He had no one else to rely on.

"Thanks for everything... So, what's the catch?"

"Catch?" Kiiro's eyes widened in surprise. Naoto glared at her.

"In a situation like this, you're usually about to bring up a 'favor' or something, right?" Treating Isa, securing Kana's video, protecting Kana herself, and even fixing the damaged classroom couldn't possibly be out of the goodness of her heart.

However, Kiirō burst out laughing as if she couldn't believe it. She placed her hand on Naoto's cheek and smiled. "Oh, Naoto-kun. Didn't I tell you? I can do anything for you, Naoto-kun. Really, anything. I could give you everything I have right here, right now."

Kiirō's words gradually became more heated. She slid her hand down Naoto's neck and wrapped her arms around him. As she smiled, her sweet breath brushed against his ear. "But if you prefer it that way, I'll consider this a 'loan'. If you want to pay me back, well... how about becoming much, much stronger, so strong it sends shivers down your spine?"

What did she mean by 'stronger'? Without explaining, Kiirō continued with her sticky, lingering presence.

She quickly distanced herself from Naoto as if the intimate contact had been a lie. Twisting her body as if to create a pose, she turned to him with an innocent girl's smile. For some reason, Naoto felt a chill from that smile. It was as if she completely trusted him. He couldn't understand how she could have such a look on her face.

(I've only met her twice, right...?)

No matter how much younger Naoto was, that wasn't the kind of expression one should direct at someone they had only met twice. He couldn't shake that feeling.

"Well then, leave that man to me. I'll contact you if I find anything out. ...Even if I don't find anything, I might contact you anyway," she said, her voice cheerful as she waved goodbye lightly. She led the remaining black-suited soldiers out of the classroom.

That's when it happened.

"Naoto!" Raquel's voice rang out in alarm, and the sound of shattering glass echoed down the corridor. The light had shattered. In an instant, the corridor was plunged into darkness.

"What the-!?" In the hallway, Naoto could hear the murmurs of the soldiers who had gone ahead. This wasn't the Mitsurugi Organization's doing. Then...

Naoto rushed out into the hallway.

A faint moonlight shone through the small window in the corridor. In the unreliable dim light, several soldiers were wandering around, their guns pointed in different directions, searching for their enemy. And behind them... darkness began to swell ominously.

"Hey, watch out!" Naoto's shout was meaningless. The swelling darkness, making a sound like dragging a heavy sandbag, quickly swallowed up the Mitsurugi Agency's soldiers. A muffled scream and a futile gunshot rang out, and even the scream was swallowed up by the darkness. The darkness expanded, filling the corridor, and made a crunching sound as if chewing something hard.

(Are they... being eaten...?)

Thinking this instinctively, Naoto recoiled and took a few steps back. Eventually, the darkness shrank as if it were being drawn in, and then vanished completely. The men were nowhere to be seen. Instead, a single man stood there.

The faint moonlight was too dim to see clearly. Raquel, who had followed Naoto into the hallway, gasped as she stared at the man. Seeing Raquel, the man laughed. With the corners of his mouth drawn up, he spread his long arms wide in a grand gesture, as if he were about to sing an opera.

"Ah... as expected, how beautiful. Moonlight suits you so well. I would have preferred to meet you under a more divine full moon, but... even so, I can feel my body trembling with excitement at the sight of your fragrant, biting appearance. Oh, how I have been looking forward to this day. It is an honor to meet you... 'Raquel Alucard'."

The man's voice, which he sang as if reciting poetry, was indistinct in the night shadows, but Raquel, who could not see his expression clearly, was captivated by his voice.

He could feel the uncontrollable excitement trembling within him. The man inhaled deeply, filling his lanky frame with air, as if trying to absorb every trace of Raquel's presence in the room into his lungs. And then he spoke.

"As you graciously invited me, I have arrived. I am Spinner Superior." Placing his wide hands over his chest, Spinner Superior bowed deeply toward Raquel. He was an eerie man. Even though it was dim, there was light. The pale moonlight created shadows all over the corridor of Shinkawahama First High School. But he was deeper than those shadows. Tall and thin, his limbs were long and shadowy, making it doubtful if he was really there. His gray hair was neatly combed back, and his black clothes had a quality that made them look expensive even in the dim corridor.

"That's... Spinner Superior..." Naoto uttered, his voice strained. Next to him, Raquel carefully inhaled. Clenching her small hands into fists, she adopted a resolute demeanor, staring boldly at Spinner without a trace of fear.

As he received her gaze, Spinner looked around slowly and tilted his head. "And... where is Kurogane Naoto?" he asked politely, as if inquiring of a princess. His sharp, slitted eyes fixed intently on Raquel. On his pale, sickly face, a strange tattoo covered one cheek.

Raquel slightly moved her head to indicate Naoto next to her. "He's over there."

"...Huh?" Spinner asked again, looking puzzled, pausing for a beat. Moving his sharp jaw, he hesitated over his words, then asked again with confusion in his narrow eyes. "Raquel Alucard. I apologize, but where is Kurogane Naoto?" He repeated Naoto's name, but he never looked at Naoto. It was as if he had completely excluded 'Kurogane Naoto' from his mind and didn't even care about him.

(Why is he talking about me...?)

Naoto had never interacted with Spinner directly. Spinner was chasing Raquel, and Raquel was looking for Spinner. That was supposed to be the relationship. Confused by the unexpected conversation between Raquel and Spinner, Raquel grabbed Naoto's arm and pulled him close.

"He is Kurogane Naoto," she said. The instant she said that, Naoto's body was slammed hard against the corridor wall, as if he had been struck by something heavy.

"Ugh..." He couldn't understand what was happening. The sudden shock was so unexpected that he couldn't even manage a proper defensive posture, and he hit the back of his head against the window frame. He could feel his back crack against the wall.

Sparks flickered at the edge of his vision. For a moment, his sight threatened to fade into darkness, but as it blurred and then cleared, Naoto held his breath at the sight of Spinner's expression before him.

"...Don't you dare touch my Raquel Alucard... you lowly creature." His suppressed tone was filled with an extraordinary rage. Spinner's eyes widened as he glared at Naoto, unleashing a merciless killing intent that seemed utterly insane.

"Oh, how disgusting... For trash like you to touch Raquel Alucard is a capital offense. Don't get cocky just because you disposed of a mere Apostle, you piece of garbage." Spinner took a large step forward, dragging his shadow behind him. "I can't stand it. I can't possibly stand it... My Raquel Alucard being soiled by the breath of trash like you. I must crush you as soon as possible..."

Muttering to himself, his voice echoed loudly through the corridor. His unnaturally long arms rose ominously. In response, the darkness behind Spinner stirred. It was the same darkness that had eaten the soldiers earlier.

"Damn it!" Naoto tried to get to his feet, pushing off the floor. But his body wouldn't move the way he wanted it to. To be honest, his body was at its limit. The hand he had put on the floor to get up was shaking weakly.

"Naoto, run!" Raquel's voice rang out sharply. Her words seemed to further enrage Spinner. The darkness swelled and slid across the corridor toward Naoto. But then, something came flying in with a slicing sound, cutting through the darkness and scattering it away. Slowly, Kiirō stood in front of Naoto and Spinner.

"What do you think you're doing? Don't get cocky, just because you're a mere 'magician'. I'll 'disassemble' you." She smiled wickedly. Naoto couldn't see what had cut through the darkness. It certainly wasn't the gun that had incapacitated Isa. It was something more mysterious... a Drive.



His fun ruined, Spinner retracted the excitement in his eyes and fixed his gaze on the new intruder. With a bored expression, he ran his long fingers along his tattooed cheek.

"Is this Drive... Kihiro from the Mitsurugi Agency?" He muttered blandly, then closed his eyes and laughed—a professional smile. ".....What does 'Mosaic' think it's doing?"

That seemingly solitary remark changed Kihiro's complexion instantly, filling it with murderous intent. The swelling malice, like it was about to explode, transformed into a sound that tore through the air, approaching Spinner.

However, Spinner lightly tapped the floor with his leather shoe, summoning darkness from beneath his feet. The darkness curled and formed a sphere that enveloped him, as if watching bubbles burst in reverse. Whatever Kihiro had released was swallowed up by that darkness and disappeared.

Once again, the darkness shifted to reveal Spinner in the hallway. The eerie man with tattoos on his face had not changed his stance even slightly since shrouding himself in darkness. However, it seemed he hadn't completely avoided harm, as there was a deep gash on his right shoulder.

If you looked closely at the wound, you could see countless maggot-like insects gathering and making a sound like chewing flesh, repairing the torn flesh. With her eyes narrowed and her expression tense, Kihiro opened her arms as if preparing to fight.

"I'll 'annihilate' you right now..."

"Oh dear... what do you think you're doing? It's pitiful for a mere puppet to be so presumptuous." As if not intending to take her seriously, Spinner calmly brushed aside a stray lock of hair with a languid gesture. But darkness still lingered at his feet. Even though she was a trivial opponent, there was no reason to overlook her. As if obeying his master's will, the darkness trembled at Spinner's feet.

Then—

"Wait," Raquel's unwavering voice echoed. There was an undeniable power in her voice. It was a voice that was different from magic or a Drive, a voice that belonged to Raquel Alucard.

"Retreat now, Spinner Superior. It's not time for you and I to fight." Raquel spoke to Spinner with a strong, almost prophetic weight, as if giving an order. Her intervention carried a force that was both commanding and impossible to defy, causing Kihiro to sharpen her voice sharply.

"Don't get in my way... little girl." There was none of the usual seductive ease. Her voice and gaze were as cold and sharp as metal, a side of Kihiro that Naoto had never imagined.

However, despite Kiiro's readiness to attack and her sharpened hostility, Spinner seemed to have completely forgotten about her at Raquel's words. He simply let the darkness retreat at his feet, behaving as if he were perhaps in a cheerful mood.

Mustering a strange, ominous smile, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

"I understand, Raquel Alucard. I merely came to pay my respects tonight," he said, bowing respectfully again. Keeping his body bent and his head bowed, Spinner looked up at Raquel. His gaze was like a spider's web. The sticky thread, while eyeing its prey, did not bind it so tightly as to show respect for its beautiful wings. He grinned, his eyes smiling. "The next time we meet, please bring the real 'Kurogane Naoto' with you. You must have been testing me, but... even someone like that trash is insulting to me."

As if delivering a line in a stage play, Spinner bowed and sank into his own shadow with a sound like dragging a sandbag. And just like that, he disappeared.

The school regained its stillness once more. The hallway was littered with the shattered fragments of stick-like light fixtures, extending far down the corridor. The clouds that had covered the day in a gloomy haze seemed to have been swept away by the wind. The moonlight shone brighter than before.

Bathed in the white moonlight, Kiiro opened her mouth without looking back at Naoto, keeping her head down. "...I'm sorry, Naoto-kun. I'm going home too..."

Her voice was weak, unlike her usual self. With her hands clasped together, trembling slightly as if she were holding back tears, Kiiro turned away from Naoto as if to turn her face away from something. Naoto watched her leave, dumbfounded.

It might have been his imagination. Maybe he had mistaken the glass shards and moonlight, but... it seemed as if he had caught a glimpse of tears streaming down Kiiro's cheeks.

The members of the Mitsurugi Agency all departed, leaving Kiiro behind. The area was still horribly damaged, but it would probably be completely restored by the start of school tomorrow. Just like the residential area that Raquel and the Bug Man had rampaged through, which had been restored overnight.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of glass breaking nearby. When Naoto looked up, Raquel was there.

"Pathetic," she said disdainfully, extending her hand to Naoto. A white hand, much like the moonlight. Beyond it was Raquel's face, with skin the color of moonlight, and her mouth, which always wore a defiant expression, was slightly curved into a smile.

(Ah... she's smiling, isn't she?)

He realized that he had never seen her smile before. As he thought about it, Naoto placed his hand on hers as if being drawn in. Spinner had said that moonlight suited Raquel. Although he disliked the idea that the opinion came from him, he couldn't help but agree.

Raquel, with her hand outstretched in the moonlight, was beautiful. Her golden hair shimmered fantastically in the moonlight. Her eyes, a slightly deeper color than her hair, were like the most beautiful jewels in the world.

"What are you doing?" Raquel frowned, puzzled, as she continued to hold Naoto's hand, who didn't seem to be trying to get up. Naoto snapped back to reality. He had been completely captivated.

"Oh, sorry. Let's get Haruka home before anyone comes," he said hastily, trying to cover up his embarrassment. With Raquel pulling him along, he got up and returned to the student council room to retrieve Haruka and the school uniform jacket he had draped over her.

The uniform was completely torn up after being attacked by Isa and Spinner, those two monsters. This shirt and pants were practically new, and now they were ruined.

(Uniforms are surprisingly expensive...) Naoto thought. If only clothes could return to their original state like his body. While mulling over such a convenient thought, he slung the unconscious Haruka over his back. He put the undamaged uniform jacket on Haruka.

"Let's go."

"Yeah."

It was already well past dinner time. As they left the school, Naoto and Raquel made their way home, trying to stay out of sight.

...It had been a long day, to say the least.

When he had been asking around about Kana at school during the day, he never would have thought that such a major event would be waiting for him at night.

The sky still had some clouds, but it was filled with bright moonlight. A crescent moon, not quite full or new, elegantly looked down at the earth.

"By the way..." Naoto turned to Raquel. With her long blonde hair swaying, Raquel turned to him.

"What?"

"Why did Spinner know my name earlier? Did Isa tell him?"

Given that he was a supposed Apostle, it wouldn't be unusual for him to have such connections, but it seemed unnecessary for Isa to inform Spinner of Naoto's name. Moreover, the fact that Raquel lived with Naoto had only come to light after Isa had started skipping school.

"Oh," Raquel said, her tone casual. "Do you remember when we fought Valkenhayn Hellsing before? I left something written on the wall."

"Yeah, I remember. I couldn't read it, though." It was next to the vending machine behind the game center, though the vending machine had been brutally destroyed by Valkenhayn.

Raquel moved her fingers in the air, as if writing letters. "I wrote, 'If you want me, make the servant Kurogane Naoto yours. If you can do that, I will become yours. Raquel Alucard.' ...That's what I wrote."

"...Huh?"

Did he hear that wrong? Didn't Raquel just say 'defeat Kurogane Naoto'?

When Naoto looked up at Raquel, confused about what she meant, she smiled slightly, a smug, superior smile.

"Still, this is troublesome. It seems I've given quite the misunderstanding ...It seems Spinner thought that an opponent on the level of Father was waiting for him." Retracting the slight smile she had shown, Raquel placed her hands on her hips and mouth, deep in thought. Her long ponytail swayed behind her like a tail with each regular step.

"Anyway, that's how it is. Do your best, servant," she said, sounding as if she didn't feel any responsibility at all, and she continued walking down the night road with light steps.

Naoto, taken aback, stopped in his tracks and stared at the scene in shock for a moment.

"You..." To the self-proclaimed master's vampire girl, who had planted such an absurd seed in his mind, Naoto shouted so loudly that it echoed around him. "Are you crazy?!" His echoing voice stretched out into the distance and was swallowed up by the soft autumn night.

It was the end of one curtain. And the beginning of another.

Chapter 6 - Interlude

The everyday life that was suddenly lost, suddenly returned.

As Kiirō has promised, the half-destroyed student council room and hallway were restored by the next day, and the school resumed its normal routine as if the previous night had never happened, proceeding with the curriculum as usual.

The chimes rang at the same intervals as always, and classmates and teachers were present as expected. Classes remained as dull as ever, lunch break brought its usual sense of freedom, and after school, Naoto observed the various facets of school life unfolding around him, feeling a bit surprised.

During homeroom, they heard that the geology teacher, Isa, had taken a leave of absence due to illness. The vice president of the student council, Kirishima Kana, had been absent for a few days due to poor health, but she returned to school on Saturday, albeit looking a little thinner.

Without the Azure, Drives, Spinner Superior, or the Mitsurugi Agency... days swiftly passed since that night. Naoto's fleeting daily life had peacefully welcomed a quiet Sunday.

On this tranquil, sunny Sunday afternoon, a pleasant autumn breeze rustled the small branches along the street. His room had been fully renovated three days ago, and for the past two days, he had returned to living in his own room. Originally, he had intended to return alone and have Raquel continue staying at Haruka's house, but at her strong insistence, they ended up sharing this room together.

Raquel's room was a small tatami room next to the living room where Haruka had slept during Clavis' visit. Haruka had opposed the idea of Raquel and Naoto living together until the very end, but once their life as a pair began, she came to care for them as she had always done, without much concern.

Even today, she had just made omelet and consommé soup for lunch, and the three of them had eaten together in Naoto's room. Incidentally, they were planning to have dinner at Haruka's house later.

(It's not like I have any complaints, but now that it's come to this, it feels silly to live separately... It's really getting out of hand...)

That said, this was Naoto's way of drawing a line. It was necessary.

Naoto stepped out onto the balcony and stared blankly at the scenery outside. Across the road, a neighboring apartment building was under renovation with scaffolding. According to a neighbor, a tiny piece of space debris had crashed into the wall, leaving a dent. The large crack made when Valkenhayn collided with the wall had nearly vanished. The traces were disappearing.

In the deserted apartment complex, there was not a trace left of when Naoto was attacked by the bug man. The mangled arm had also disappeared somewhere. The room that Clavis had ransacked was now usable by Naoto without any problems, showing no signs of the turmoil that had taken place.

The same went for the school.

No scars remained on Naoto's body.

So, the only thing that demonstrated that the various events of the past week were real... was the presence of Raquel, sitting on the living room sofa, engrossed in a book.

(...Well, maybe not.)

Leaning his arms on the balcony railing and resting his chin on his arms, Naoto murmured to himself as he gazed at the construction scaffolding, which was unoccupied today.

He had just been reminded of the state of his surroundings a few hours ago.

The location was a splendid hotel in front of the station, one where weddings were also held. To make matters worse, he had been brought to the top floor, to a members-only salon, and invited into a private room separated by thick curtains, where they sat together on a large sofa and talked for over thirty minutes.

The topics were mainly about Isa, Kana, and Haruka. About Isa, who had become Spinner's Apostle, and the two girls who had unfortunately been involved with him, both in the past and in the future.

Apparently, Iza had successfully removed the implanted insects. It seemed that the necessary measures had already been taken for Kana, and that Haruka would be taken care of as Naoto wished.

Of course, it couldn't end there, but that was about the only information Naoto could find comforting from being summoned that day.

The rest of the conversation, to be honest, wasn't very pleasant. Even so, he was able to return home without dragging the unpleasantness with him, thanks to Raquel, who had come to pick him up after learning about the summons... though he couldn't be sure how much Raquel understood that.

(Even now, she's really engrossed in her book... And...)

The book she was reading was "The Definitive Guide to Blood Type Fortune-Telling Part 7," which she had borrowed from Haruka. The sight of a vampire engrossed in blood type fortune-telling was hilariously absurd. And sometimes she would even...

"This is amazing..." she said, impressed.

(I wonder what's so amazing about it...)

Naoto watched as Raquel became engrossed, forgetting about the tea he had brewed for her. He thought he might ask to see it later.

Just then...

"Out of the way, out of the way, move aside, Nao-kun." Haruka came in with light steps, carrying a mountain of laundry in a basket she had bought at a 100-yen shop.

"Seriously, why do you let the laundry pile up so much?"

Of course, the laundry inside belonged to this house. Naoto had a habit of doing all the laundry for the week on Sundays, but he hadn't been able to do it last Sunday due to the incident with Clavis and Valkenhayn. So, excluding the time he spent at Haruka's house, about two weeks' worth of laundry had accumulated in Naoto's bathroom.

"Sorry, I'll help..." Even though she always took the initiative since they were childhood friends, he felt a bit hesitant to leave everything to her. He reached out to help hang the laundry, but she lightly swatted his hand away.

"No way! Every time you hang it, it ends up all wrinkled. Just go sit in the corner and watch outside." Her playful tone made it hard for Naoto to respond, so he retreated to the corner of the balcony. Reluctantly pretending to look outside, he observed Haruka skillfully spreading out the laundry. To be precise, he was watching the numbers above Haruka's head.

Since that night, her numbers had remained low. It seemed she was struggling more mentally than physically. Although the numbers were gradually recovering, they were still quite low compared to her usual average today. Still, Haruka acted as if everything was normal. She asked Naoto to do the same. She tackled her usual tasks with a smile that seemed completely normal.

(Haruka is strong...)

With a light breeze ruffling her bangs, Naoto returned his gaze to the distant view. She was always a strong-willed person, but even so...

(No... that doesn't mean she's strong.)

Naoto quickly retracted his thoughts.

He felt a small jolt and warmth on his back. It was Haruka. She had lightly grasped the back of his shirt and was pressing her forehead against him. After a few seconds, a faint voice reached his ears.

"Um, you know, Nao-kun... I still haven't properly thanked you."

"...Yeah."

"Thank you for coming that time..."

"Yeah," Naoto replied with a minimal hum, trying to make his voice sound as cheerful as possible while desperately trying to keep from trembling. He wanted to encourage her to continue.

Haruka's fingers tightened around his clothes, and a fine tremor ran down Naoto's back. Haruka's breathing, which he could hear through her back, was labored and occasionally caught.

"I thought that if I said something like this, it might worry you... But, you know, back then... I was really scared."

"...Yeah."

"I was really scared. I was so scared that I wanted to run away... but I couldn't, and I really didn't know what to do..." Listening to Haruka's pleading voice, Naoto bit his lip, trying not to be noticed.

...She couldn't be strong. She couldn't be okay.

Haruka had likely been carrying the wounds from that day, unable to put them into words. By acting as if everything were normal, she had been desperately trying to maintain and protect herself.

Slowly swallowing the words that felt like they were choking her, she had finally managed to articulate them to Naoto today.

"But you came, Nao-kun. I was really happy when you did..."

Had her sadness settled a bit? Was it no longer the tear-streaked face she had tried to hide?

Thinking this, Naoto slowly turned toward Haruka. He reached out to gently embrace her, placing a hand on her head to hide her tear-filled eyes. Holding the slight weight resting on his chest in his arms, he spoke in a calm tone.

"But I was a little late. ...I'm sorry."

"No, no..." Haruka shook her head slightly in Naoto's embrace. He could hear the soft sound of her breath as her lips curled into a small smile. "I was just happy that you came." She whispered, and shifted in Naoto's arms. She placed her hands on his chest and looked up at Naoto. Her big, dark eyes were filled with Naoto's reflection. Haruka's eyes were filled with a different emotion than the sadness and fear she had shown earlier.

(Oh... crap. This pattern again...)

A fleeting thought crossed Naoto's mind, as he felt confused by the change in the atmosphere surrounding them. But then, as if clinging to him, Haruka lightly grasped his shirt and leaned in closer, prompting Naoto to reposition his hands from her back to her cheek and shoulder. Haruka squinted against the brightness. Naoto followed suit, but from there, neither of them knew what would happen next.

Naoto didn't know whether to close his eyes. As he was caught up in the moment, Haruka's lips came closer, their soft peach color trembling slightly as if seeking a hint of kindness, exhaling a gentle breath. Naoto closed his eyes, tilting Haruka's chin up a little more.

Just then, a loud, relentless ringing of the doorbell shattered the moment, cutting through the air.

"Wha—!? What!?" Caught off guard, Naoto instinctively pulled his hands away from Haruka. Haruka, who had been reaching up, dropped back down and turned to look at the noisy entrance.

What was happening? Rushing to check the room, he saw Raquel glaring at the door, clearly annoyed, while hiding behind the sofa. Like a kitten.

"Shut up! This isn't a gamepad button!" What a rude visitor. He shouted angrily from the bottom of his stomach, but the doorbell continued to ring, drowning out Naoto's voice. He felt like he was being provoked. Just as he was about to storm back into the living room to yell back, he felt a small tug on his arm. "Eh..."

It was Haruka who had pulled him. She turned Naoto around, caught his cheek, and stretched up to touch him lightly. Her sweet breath vanished as she pulled away.

Naoto was momentarily frozen, and with a mischievous smile, Haruka gently pressed her fingertip against her lips, which had just touched his.

"It's my first time!" As Haruka laughed, the numbers above her head shifted. What Naoto saw was her usual, normal average—no different from any other day. With this, he couldn't help but smile inwardly. He felt a sense of relief. It felt like it had been a long time since he'd seen Haruka's true smile.

"...Me too." He replied, thinking it was good if Haruka could truly smile like this, even if the words he spoke were a "lie." Haruka giggled awkwardly and turned around gracefully.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming." She went out into the hallway from the living room with light footsteps.

Watching her go, Naoto leaned against the balcony railing. He could still faintly feel her soft touch on his lips, the sensation of something that wasn't his, along with the lingering sweet scent of her breath. He wondered if his face was turning red. Suddenly worried, he rubbed his slightly warm cheeks with the back of his hand, knowing the heat wouldn't fade away.

Just then, Haruka, who had gone to answer the door, rushed back in a hurry.

"Nao-kun, something's wrong! Come quickly!"

"What's wrong... Did a salesman come or something?"

"Just hurry!" For a moment, Naoto hesitated, trying to understand, but Haruka quickly gave up and pulled harder on his arm. Naoto, tilting his head in confusion, followed her lead... and when he saw the person at the front door, he was speechless.

The visitor was a girl wearing a kimono with long black hair tied up at the back. A sword bag containing a rod-shaped object was placed beside her. From its shape, there was no doubt that the contents were indeed a sword.

The girl sat there in perfect seiza, completely undisturbed by the ground beneath her. She closed her eyes with the stillness of someone meditating, her hands folded on her lap, listening for the sound of approaching footsteps.

As soon as Naoto and Haruka stopped, the girl opened her eyes. Both Naoto and Haruka knew that girl. And the girl knew Haruka and Naoto very well.

"It's been a while, Haruka-san."

Remaining seated in seiza, she bowed her head in a perfectly drawn bow, her hands neatly in front of her. Haruka hurriedly knelt on the doormat and followed suit, putting her hands on the floor. But she couldn't believe it. That she would be here.

"Uh, um... has it really...?"

"Yes," the girl raised her head with a samurai-like movement and answered firmly. She looked at Haruka with red eyes from behind her cut bangs and said without hesitation, "I am Saya Terumi."

That was her name.

After introducing herself, Sayaka turned to Naoto and bowed deeply once more.

"It's been a long time. I'm glad to see you well."

"Is... is that really you, Saya?" Naoto's voice trembled as he asked.

What did she hear in that? As she raised her head from her formal bow, she replied, "Yes, brother." And with that, Saya smiled with her red lips.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up this book. My name is Mako Komao, the author.

For those of you meeting me for the first time, nice to meet you. Please keep in mind. For those of you who haven't seen me in a while, it's nice to see you again.

Now, this book is a completely new story novel, written by me, Mako Komao, with the original concept by Toshimichi Mori, producer of Arc System Works. Unlike the "BLAZBLUE" series with the same combination, this is an original novel, not a novelization of the game.

However, as some of you may know, this novel has several connections to the fighting game "BLAZBLUE". If you enjoyed this book and would like to take a peek at the complex world behind it, please try playing the "BLAZBLUE" game. Oh, and various novelization series are also on sale. Please enjoy them together.

Now, then. "Blood Edge Experience" has come to an end with the first volume, and it seems like it will continue to the next one. How was it? Did you enjoy it? Were there any characters or episodes you liked?

In my impression, the main characters and heroine are so cute that I couldn't help but want them to be happy as I faced the story. Incidentally, as I'm writing the afterword, Komao doesn't know the ending yet... I hope they'll be happy.

I've been working on this one book for a really long time, and I've been helped by so many people.

Of course, more than anyone else, I would like to thank Mori-san, the original creator and producer. Thank you so much. I can't thank you enough for choosing me as the author. I'll do my best on the second volume too!

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the editorial staff. Honestly, I had completely lost my composure, so your encouraging voices were very reassuring.

kyo, the illustrator, thank you for the dynamic cover and the wonderful capture. Unfortunately, I was the only one among the staff who couldn't meet you... I hope to meet you someday. Thank you very much for that time.

Finally, thank you to those of you who read this book. I hope this one book will spark something in your heart. And I hope to deliver a sequel that will shake off that spark and tear it apart. Thank you for your continued support.

Well then, see you in the next volume. Excuse me.

Mako Komao



皆さんこんにちは
アークシステムワークスの森利道です。

プレイブルーの
新シリーズが始まりました。
このお話につきましては、
黒鉄ナオト、そしてラケルが行き着いた
先で何が起き、そして読者様が
何を思うかを期待して構成しています。
出来ればもう少し続けたいな～と
思っていますので、応援おねがいします！！

<追伸>

僕のがまに付き合っ頂いた
多くの方々に深く深く感謝致します。
真子先生、kyo先生、頑張ってください

